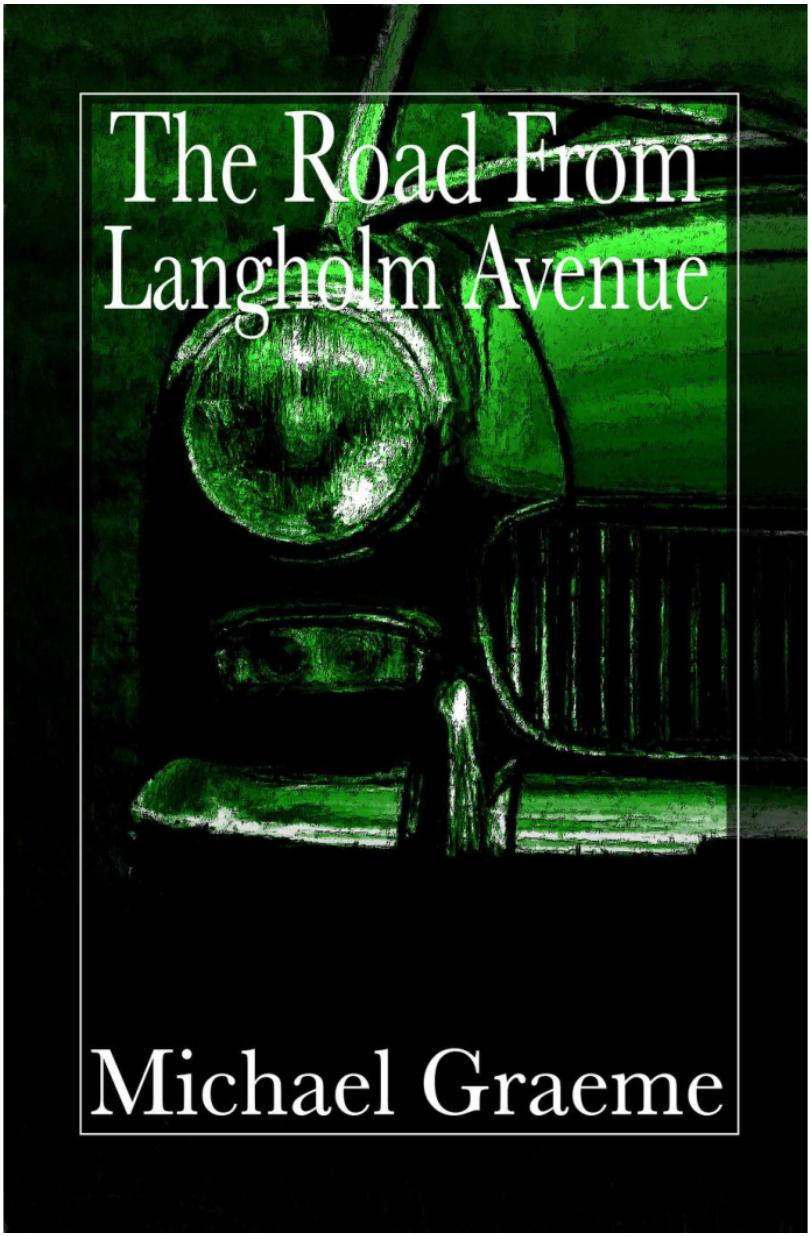
The Road From
Langholm Avenue
Michael Graeme

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THE ROAD FROM LANGHOLM AVENUE
by
Michael Graeme

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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* * * * *

For Rachel

* * * * *

THE ROAD FROM LANGHOLM AVENUE

* * * * *

CHAPTER 1

I don't know what drew me back to that house and even now I'm surprised it should have possessed sufficient gravity after all those years to lure me from my course. I recall little of the journey that delivered me there, only a slow surfacing to the realisation that I'd pulled the car over, switched off the engine and had been staring at the place for what already seemed like an age.

It had changed. I'd been expecting the same painted window frames and the same mahogany door with the little rose window at the top, but it had all been replaced by a uniform white PVC. There had been a willow tree in a corner of the front garden but that had gone too, along with the neatly clipped privet hedge in order to make way for a rather vulgar block-paved driveway.

The passing of twenty years had left its mark. Or was it longer? Just when was the last time I'd swung my course by Langholm Avenue? I thought I'd finished with all that nonsense by now, but if that were true, then why was I sitting there, forty-two years old, going on seventeen once more?

I was there for an hour, perhaps longer, I can't say for certain but it was long enough to alert the Neighbourhood Watch, who alerted the police, who sent their dowdy little patrol car to investigate my mysterious sojourn. It pulled up quietly behind me and for a moment nothing happened, though I suppose my registration number was being passed through a computer somewhere.

Endorsements none, I imagined it saying; convictions none; parking ticket in the summer of 1982 or thereabouts - altogether a rather dull biography of my motoring years. Eventually, a lone policewoman emerged. She looked no more than twenty, and she might have been pretty except she seemed at pains to hide this gift beneath a mask of dour severity. I wound the window down at her request, and in her driest tone she said: "Been having a nap have we, sir?"

Without waiting for an answer, she began to circle the car, inspecting it with a patient and practised eye for the easy hit: road tax, bald tyres, anything broken or hanging off. But even though the old Midget had definitely seen better days, I was confident it had scored well.

"Live round here, do you?" she asked.

"Parbold," I replied. But her computer had already told her that. Was she trying to catch me out? And what else had it told her? Did it also know I'd been married for fifteen years? Wife's name: Annie. Supplementary information: Separated at five thirty yesterday afternoon. Reason: Annie preferred wide-arsed gent by the name of Alistair,...

"I'm going to visit my dad," I told her. "He lives in Arkwright Street."

"Well, this is Langholm Avenue" she replied. "Forgotten our way have we perhaps?"

Her tone was irritating, as if she was trying to tempt out my anger, make me swear and shake my fist so she'd have reason to beat me senseless with her stick. She was wasting her time. There was no anger, nothing left inside of me now.

"Has there been a complaint?" I asked.

She ignored the question and instead demanded to see my documents - insurance certificate, MOT, driver's licence, the usual. I reached behind the passenger seat and pulled out an envelope which I handed to her. She was disappointed perhaps that I should have had the papers on me, but right then most of my life seemed to be in the car, or at least as much of it as I'd thought to rescue from the house that morning.

Everything was in order. She scanned through the papers slowly and handed them back without a murmur. Then she looked at the car again, her gaze passing lazily from one end to the other as if she couldn't believe there wasn't something she could book me for.

"A bit untidy isn't it sir?"

"I've not had it long. I've changed the tyres, done the electrics and brakes and such. It's perfectly road worthy."

She regarded me closely, her eyes narrowing for the kill. "Waiting for someone are we, perhaps?"

"No, I was just thinking," I said.

"Thinking?"

"Sort of."

She sighed. "Mind opening the boot, sir?"

I flipped open the boot, and stood back while she ran her hands over the surface of my possessions. It was filled to the brim and she didn't know where to start. Eventually, she registered the main items: my antique laptop computer, an old sketch book, my camera

gear and a boxed chess set my father had given me for my eighteenth birthday. Then there was the case of clothes, the shaving kit,...

"Can't get much else in here can you?" she said. "I take it you can prove all this stuff is yours?"

"I don't suppose I can. It's mostly very old. I've no receipts or anything if that's what you mean."

"Then how do you explain it?"

I was puzzled. What was there to explain? Did she think I'd stolen it? "I can't, " I said. "It's just my personal gear."

She took out the sketch book. It was one I'd kept since my last year at school, a quarter of a century ago. The drawings were careful studies of flowers and figures - better than anything I'd done in more recent times. She flicked through these pictures carelessly, or so I thought, but she was a sharp eyed girl and it didn't take her long to notice the address written in faded pencil at the top of the very first page: Langholm Avenue,...

"What about this then?"

Of all the things she could have homed in on, it had to be that! Why not the missing pawn from my chess set, the one I'd replaced by making a near perfect copy at work? Care to explain the difference, sir? Or how about the fact that most of my shirts had buttons that didn't match? Bit untidy, don't you think, sir? No, it had to be the sketch book and suddenly I found myself sweating at the prospect of explaining the inexplicable to a woman who looked like she neither cared nor could ever be made to understand.

"It was someone I used to know," I began. "It was their house."

"Does this someone have a name?"

A name? Of course She had a name but to my astonishment I realised that even after all these years to have spoken it under those circumstances would have been a sacrilege, and I would rather have damned myself by the most transparent lie and gone to prison for it than speak it now.

"She doesn't live there any more. It was all such a long time ago."

The policewoman weighed me up while the curtains of Langholm Avenue fidgeted around us on that grey Saturday afternoon. I was clean, as they say; no guns, no explosives, no suitcase stuffed with counterfeit money, no seedy stash of drugs - just a middle aged chap sitting in an old car, apparently thinking.

"This is a quiet neighbourhood, sir," she said. "I suggest you move on. I'll be back shortly and if you're still here, our next conversation will be at the station. Is that understood?"

When she'd gone, I sank inside the Midget and turned the key. The engine spluttered uncertainly, then caught and purred. The dials twitched - old dials, silver on black-crackle, telling me an antiquated tale of volts and oil-pressure. Finally, pulling away from Langholm Avenue, pulling out of the past, I felt the name welling up inside of me.

"Rachel," I said. "Her name was Rachel."

CHAPTER 2

When I was younger, I had a way of dealing with emotional pain. I would take every piece of physical evidence I could lay my hands on, anything that reminded me of the source, and I would throw it away.

It's not a bad technique if all you're trying to do is get over being jilted by your girlfriend because then the evidence might only amount to a sweater, some CD's and a birthday card you've sworn you'll keep for ever. But when it's your wife, things are not so simple. With a wife, the evidence is usually more substantial. For a start, there's the house, a tangle of mortgages, endowments and direct debits,... and sometimes there are children; two children in fact, Stephen and Jemima.

Already I had not seen them for three days, so deftly were they spirited from the house, the stage being prepared by Annie for that astonishing finale to the fifteen year act that had been our marriage. Afterwards, walking through the house, I'd picked out what few items I could think of as belonging solely to me - the antiquated laptop, the camera, the sketchbook. The rest I'd consigned to an imaginary dustbin until I could get my mind around what had happened.

The sketchbook was a mystery. I had not looked at it for years, but pulling open the drawer that morning I had fastened my eyes upon it as if remembering something crucial. Then I'd seen the address pencilled on the front sheet. I had written it with care, as if it were a verse from a love poem, but I no longer recognised the hand. Indeed, it might have been written by a stranger,... not just because of the style, but also the sentiment.

Art had been my thing at school, and even without looking I knew every sketch book I'd owned around that time had carried the same mantra: 11 Langholm Avenue, *her* house, Rachel's house, a house I'd never been inside,... the house of a girl I'd loved with all my heart, but never really known.

Unlike Rachel's house, my father's on Arkwright Street hadn't changed at all since I'd grown up, at least on the outside. It was to the north of Middleton, one in a long row of Edwardian terraces, just a couple of miles but a world away from the lower middle-class, semi-detached suburb of Langholm Avenue.

Arkwright street had an altogether darker look about it. This had been the mill district and it was still easy to imagine the scrape of clogs on cobbles, the clatter of looms, the gasp of steam. Langholm Avenue had borne the lighter vision, the optimism of the sixties - the new, dynamic industries - Leyland Motors, Britannia Electric, but like the mills, they too were mostly gone now, leaving both streets looking weary and frayed in their disappointment.

In that terraced cottage, my father had begun to sink into his old age, becoming threadbare and worn since his breakdown, since the last pit closed and since his only son had gone off with some posh cow from Parbold. But then, to the astonishment of us all, only a few years ago, things had changed.

When I pulled up outside, he opened the front door wearing a pair of neatly pressed Chinos and a GAP shirt. His white hair was brushed neatly back, thin and slick, over his pink scalp and he wore a pair of designer rimless specs. Money had never been a problem, not since the generous Coal Board payout, but with my father, like me, his sense of well-being had always been vulnerable to a fickle motivation. It drifted in and out with the seasons, sometimes standing bare and black against a winter's sky and sometimes swelling with ecstatic blossom, as if at the promise of summer,... or of a woman.

"Come in you daft bugger," he said and then he looked down at my overnight bag in dismay. "Is that all you've brought with you?"

"There's some other stuff in the car."

He eyed the rust pocked outline of the MG in astonishment. "That's yours? What happened to the bloody Rover?"

"I sold it."

He pulled a face, pretending he couldn't understand. "What for?"

"I preferred the look of this one, that's all."

"But it's a bloody wreck!"

Eleanor appeared behind him then, as always a slightly eerie vision in her long black dress and with her black hair worn long and loose, all the way down to her waist. There was black lipstick, black nail varnish and black eyeliner. Always she was the same, since the first time I'd met her, and according to my father long before then. At thirty five, she was seven years younger than me, but she appeared timeless and might have passed for any age between twenty five and forty.

"How's my favourite stepson, then?" she asked.

My father shook his head and took my bag. "He's a bloody dick-head, that's what he is. He should have kicked *her* out. It's as much his house as hers. Hard faced cow!"

Eleanor smiled at my father's tone while appearing almost to float towards me. Then she wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me, putting back some warmth into a soul all but frozen by a sudden and terrible rejection. I took a breath, breathing her in, and gave myself over to her scent and to her softness.

"We'll sort that out later, Jack," she told him and then to me: "I'll ask our Phil to take you over tomorrow and fetch the rest of your stuff in his van. Has she got a solicitor yet?"

Had she? I'd no idea. It seemed too soon to be thinking of such things. Only yesterday, I'd been a married man. We'd been out last weekend and bought a new sofa, for pity's sake! Then last night I'd come home to find her sitting hand in hand on it with a well groomed, wide-arsed gent! I'd stared at them, imagining perhaps he'd come to sell us some insurance - except why was he holding her hand?

Annie had looked at me, quite calmly and with the hint of a smile. "Tom,... this is Alistair," she'd said. "There's something you should know,...."

Know? What did I know? I was forty-two years old and realising, perhaps not for the first time in my life, I knew nothing at all.

Eleanor looked me in the eyes unblinking, unselfconsciously searching. It was a disturbing mannerism, one few people could endure without distress, unless they knew her,... knew she meant no harm, that her heart was not black like the clothes she wore.

"Are you all right, Tom?"

"I'm okay."

"Kids?"

"At her mother's."

"You're still their dad."

"Am I?"

But I couldn't think about the children; I had to shut them out or I would go mad. They'd be all right of course; they had the house, their mother, a large contingent of doting in-laws. What was an estranged father in the greater scheme of things?

"Dad looks great," I said, switching the subject.

"He's fine," she replied. "We're both fine."

"I won't stay long. I won't get in the way."

"Tom, for goodness sake! Anyway, we were expecting you hours ago."

"I know. I did something,... something a little crazy,... something I don't understand,..."

I felt her hand on my shoulder, guiding me towards the door.

"We'll talk about it later. Bring your stuff in." Then she looked around to check my father was out of earshot. "How bad is it?"

It was her openness - the open stare, the eyes wide but soft with sympathy that finally brought the tears, so slow in coming I'd thought I didn't really care.

"It's finished," was all I could say.

Once more she folded me quietly into her embrace and held me there, suspended in her stillness until the moment had passed. I was dazed and I was numb with it all, for I'm a steady sort of chap and I'd imagined nothing more until the end of my days but Annie and the children.

CHAPTER 3

There was no television in my father's house. He'd thrown it out the day we'd buried my mum and that was twenty years ago. He said it reminded him of her, a rotund little figure for ever camped in front of it. Then he told me, years later, it was because he couldn't stand the bloody thing and resented paying the license fee for the superficial crap they served up in the name of entertainment. But I think the truth was he'd just lost interest in everything,... until the day he'd met Eleanor.

Gone as well these days was the floral patterned paper in the lounge and the yellowing paint-work. In its place there were pastel shades and scatter cushions to co-ordinate the old sofa. This was Eleanor's influence but she had reached my father in other ways, more profound: he was seventy five, but I swear at times he seemed decades younger than me.

After bringing in the last of my gear, I found him in the spare room. I'd helped him to convert it into a study, a place he could sit down and finally write the book he'd been going on about since the eighties: *the decline of the trade unions* - a sort of therapy, he'd told me, getting it off his chest, forcing all his ghosts into the open. I'd set him up with a computer and everything, but as soon as he'd started to write, he'd decided no one cared anyway, including him, an ex union official; that had been three years ago. Instead he'd discovered the Internet. And Eleanor.

"So, go on then," he said, without looking up from the keyboard. "Why did you dump the Rover? You've not had it six months."

"I know."

"It had a good ride."

"I know. Maybe that was it. Lately I've been feeling remote all the time, cushioned from everything. I wanted to feel the world up close, like when I was a kid - struggling with broken down old motor bikes and clapped out cars."

"Well, you'll feel the world in that thing all right," he said. "Get a Midget up to seventy and it's like being dragged along the floor on a bloody shovel. You had one before, didn't you? That was a wreck as well from what I remember."

"Long time ago, Dad."

"You nearly killed yourself in it."

"Don't remind me,... but this one won't do seventy, it needs a re-bore. Anyway, how's Eleanor these days?"

He seemed surprised by the question. "She's okay. Looks okay, doesn't she?"

"Sure."

"Then why mention it?"

I'd meant only to divert him, to fend off his needling over the car, which had begun to irritate me. "It's just,..."

He paused and looked up from the computer, which I read as a bad sign. "What?" he said.

"I was just wondering about her clothes - she always wears the same sort of stuff. You know,... all that black. It's more than just a fashion thing, isn't it?"

He gave me a warning look "That's her business". he said.

"I just wondered."

"Well don't."

"Sorry, I didn't mean anything. You know how I feel about Eleanor."

He relaxed. "I know."

I cast about desperately for another change of subject. "She said she'd do us a stroganoff later."

"Oh,.. right."

The moment had passed and I think we were both relieved. We'd never made a habit of talking and tended to leave the deep and meaningful stuff well alone. No cosy man to man chats: You see, Tom, this is the way it is, lad,...

He returned his attention to the computer and shook his head again in mock despair. "Daft bugger - I bet you didn't get was it was worth either."

"What's that then?"

"The bloody Rover!"

After supper, I washed the pots and wiped down the work surfaces in the kitchen while Eleanor took time out in the lounge. If nothing else, marriage had made a relatively modern man out of me, but not so my father who returned to his study as soon as we'd eaten.

I joined her, drawn in by the sound of Bruch's violin concerto. She did not acknowledge my presence but remained for a long time a picture of dark serenity, a frozen black lotus, cross legged upon the floor, the black petals of her long dress spread evenly about her.

Naturally, I had been alarmed by her sudden appearance in my father's life,... this strange woman with the Morticia looks. So far as I could work out from what little he'd told me, they had met in the waiting room of Middleton General's clinical psychology unit.

"She's been poorly," was as much as he'd ever told me, but how poorly and what particular demons were her tormentors, I did not know. Nor could I imagine what her motives were in latching on to a man so many years her senior. He'd been all right for money since the Coal-Board payout, but he was a long way from being wealthy, and certainly not much of a sugar daddy. Most puzzling to me was the fact that my father had once begrudgingly admitted, there was precious little fire down below these days, as he put it, the result of a life propped up on pills since nineteen eighty five. And Eleanor was still young,...

The marriage had been the subject of a great deal of ridicule among my aunts and uncles,... even a sensationalist picture in the increasingly seedy local rag. Annie had loved every morsel of the scandal, though not enough to come with me to the registry office the day they'd tied the knot.

"Hollywood actors do it all the bloody time," my father had said. "I don't see what the fuss is about."

He'd known of course. Like always, he'd simply been fending things off by acting numb, by assuming the easy role of a cantankerous, ornery old git. But there was more to him than that - more to both of them than met the eye.

There'd been just me and Eleanor's brother, Phil, that day - Eleanor dressed completely in black as usual and looking very beautiful in spite of it - and my father, the years falling from him and a new determination in the set of his jaw.

That was just three summers ago.

"Go on then," she said, snatching me back to the present, as the Bruch faded away.

"Hmnn?"

"This thing you did,... You can't just say something like that and expect to get away without telling me everything, you know?"

"Oh, it was nothing. It was stupid. A stupid thing to do. I was in a state, what with Annie and everything. I don't know why I did it."

"So, tell your stepmother all about it."

She was looking at me, smiling, her hair almost brushing the carpet as she sat there. In the beginning, there had been an

awkwardness between us as we had each struggled by our looks and our words to define the level of our relationship - her being my stepmother, yet so many years younger. Eventually, we had learned to make a joke of it, and I had learned to trust her openness, to trust that whatever Eleanor said, she never meant any harm.

I lay down on the sofa and turned my face to the ceiling so I might be spared her gaze. I was afraid of what I'd done. Was I losing my grip? Was I starting down the path that had dogged my father most of his life? Was it some sort of genetic disorder that resulted in depression and an eventual nervous breakdown? Had this thing with Annie pushed me so close to the edge as that, and so quickly?

"Did you ever love someone?" I asked. " I mean someone who didn't know you loved them?"

Eleanor was quiet for a long while, so that in the end I thought she'd considered the question too personal but eventually she said: "Yes."

I waited for her to go on but she didn't and I found myself jumping in to fill the silence. "It normally doesn't last long does it? I mean, a summer,... a season. You blink and it's gone."

"I suppose it can happen like that."

"It was a bit different for me. It began the day I first saw her, at school. I remember the date as clearly as the birthdays of my children. It was September, 1974, a Wednesday morning, a watery sun coming in through the windows of the classroom. The headmaster had brought her in half way through the lesson - a new pupil, her first day. 'This is Rachel Standish,' he said.

"I looked at her. Our eyes met for a moment as she took everybody in, but I don't think she was really aware of me. All the same, I felt something in my heart tear wide open and that was it,... until the day I walked out of my last examination in the summer of '77, three and a half years later."

"That's so romantic, Tom - and so sad. "

"No, the really sad bit is I was still thinking of her for years afterwards - until I started dating for real I suppose. Then the memories got buried under a load of other stuff. But I'm beginning to wonder if she's always been there - that she's never really gone away."

"Didn't you speak to her? Did you never tell her how you felt?"

"I'd just freeze whenever she was near "

"Is that what this is about then? This thing you did? Did you see her?"

"No. When we were at school, her picture was in the Clarion. She'd won a trophy for net ball and they'd given her address - 11 Langholm Avenue, so every chance I got, I'd ride my bike past her house after school, even though it was miles out my way.

"I was still doing it years later, on my motorbike, then my car,... just cruising by. I couldn't let her go, even though after all that time you'd think I would've realised how hopeless it was.

"I imagined that if I'd seen her, I could have pulled over and said 'hi' and that would have been all we'd needed to get things moving,... except of course I didn't see her. Anyway, from the moment I learned her address, it became a precious thing and I'd write it down on the first page of all my sketch books and my diaries - anything personal. It felt like a lucky charm, having the mark of Her on everything I did.

"Then, this morning when I was gathering some stuff together to bring with me, I found an old sketchbook. I don't know, Eleanor,... everything was such a mess with Annie and yet I felt nothing, just sort of numb inside. Then, seeing that address, it took me back to a time when I used to really feel things, feel them so deeply I'd go writing down a girl's address, because in the absence of anything more tangible, it brought me closer to her."

I heard Eleanor shifting, moving nearer. Then I felt her hand on my arm and I turned to find myself pitched into the disturbing well of her gaze. "So you went round?" she asked.

"It wasn't as if I expected her to be there or anything. I just wanted to see if I could remember the feeling."

"And did you?"

"Yes."

"What was it like? "

"It was,... intense,... incredible really after all that time - the sadness, the melancholy and yet, in a way it was good, because lately I hardly seem to feel anything at all. In fact, I don't think I've felt anything in years, until this afternoon."

"It's just shock, Tom. You only found out about Annie yesterday. Do you remember the line of that Joni Mitchell song? 'there's comfort in melancholy'."

The plaintive music of Joni Mitchell was one of the things we shared. In fact I'd given Eleanor all my old vinyl when Annie had

refused to give it house-room any more. "No," I said. "It's something else, something fundamental inside of me that's gone wrong."

"What was her name, Tom?"

"Her name?"

"The girl at school."

I hesitated, even with Eleanor.

"It was Rachel," I said.

"And the way you felt about Rachel. Have you ever felt as intensely about anyone else?"

It seemed odd to be suddenly talking about Rachel,... about the way I'd felt,... for I'd never spoken of her to anyone before. So far as the rest of the world was concerned, my love for her was of no account. My misery throughout all those years was entirely self inflicted and of no consequence in the greater scheme of things. I thought about it for a long time, wrenching my eyes back to the swirling patterns on the ceiling. How many women had there been after Rachel? Five? Six? And of those only two I had known intimately, before Annie.

There had been excitement and warmth and with some a sense of recklessness, of danger, but had any of them been able to reach down inside and tear me apart? Had they sent me home too sick to eat and dreading tomorrow for its emptiness? Had they filled my life with melancholy, comforting or otherwise?

"No," I said. "It's like I've been searching for it ever since Rachel, and never found it."

"Not even with Annie?"

"Apparently not."

I sat up then, burying my head in my hands. I could hear my words and they sounded stupid. "But it was just a crush,... a difficult age. You bruise so easily then."

"Tom, you were in love."

"It was still crazy, going back."

"You don't know what crazy is."

"It means nothing,..."

"I'm not so sure. It's just a pity you never asked her out."

"She would have said no."

"How can you be certain? She might have been flattered. Or perhaps you're right - she would have said no, but at least if you'd asked you would have had your answer and stopped thinking about her, long before now."

"I didn't have the guts. My feelings were so strong, and a part of me desperately wanted to believe she felt the same way about me, that secretly she yearned for me in the same way and that we were both too shy to do anything about it."

"Ah,... now we're getting to it."

"So you see, it was better to go on not knowing, to go on living the fantasy that she loved me, rather than risk her rejection and have to face the reality,... that she did not even think of me, that she barely knew I existed."

"And it's the not knowing that's kept it alive."

"But I haven't thought of her in years."

"Are you sure?"

"Okay, there have been times when I've thought about her, wondered where she is, what she's doing,... times when I've asked myself what if? But life goes on. You meet someone else, you get married, you have children and these things go away, don't they?"

She sank back into the lotus and rested her head against the wall. "Not always," she said. "The subconscious is a strange place, Tom. The psychiatrist I used to see at the hospital said it was like a lake of the blackest water you can imagine. It's where we bury all our demons, but we have no way of knowing how deep. They might lie hundreds of fathoms down, so deep they're as good as dead, but some demons we might carry our whole lives barely inches below the surface and we would never know. Sometimes those demons can break through and haunt us when we least expect it."

I spent the night in my old room. It was one of the few places in the house not to have changed. The bed was in the same place, the worn out sixties furniture, the lamp shade, everything was as it had been, right down to the little rings on the carpet where as a boy I'd spilled my tiny pots of Airfix paint, and the pin pricks in the ceiling from where I'd strung up my model aeroplanes.

It had been a long road from that room to a detached executive brick-box on Parbold's Lindley Crescent, and only now, laying my Rolex back on that old bedside cabinet, the cabinet where I had once laid my first Timex, did I realise how far I'd travelled. I'm not saying my life was a big deal. I was still a small town boy, worked at the same engineering firm in Middleton since leaving school. I'd never chased promotion, not travelled much, never made love on a sun-kissed beach with the waves crashing all around me, but I had found contentment with Annie and my children. It had seemed a

worthy goal and I had never wanted to be anywhere other than where I was. I'd been so sure, so set. Where the hell had it all gone wrong?

CHAPTER 4

It was Monday before I could face going back. Phil picked me up at nine in his old Sherpa, honking his horn in the street to bring me running. He gave Eleanor a half hearted wave and a nod while she stood to see us off, but little else passed between them by way of greeting.

I climbed aboard. "Thanks, Phil."

He shrugged as if to say it was no problem.

He was dark haired, like his sister, but his skin had more colour. He was almost swarthy in fact and from the size of his gut, I guessed he liked his beer. The last time I'd seen him had been at my father's wedding and he hadn't said much then either. I remembered him telling me he'd worked for the Standard Machine company in Leyland, but he'd been given notice of redundancy. I'd asked him about his plans and he'd shrugged, as if he hadn't known, nor really cared much about what he would do.

I'd already telephoned Annie that morning to tell her we were coming. She'd been abrupt. It was a bad time and didn't I know she had the kids to get ready for school? It was as if it was my fault for running off and leaving her in the lurch. I think I even said I was sorry but then decided to be firm and told her I'd be there in an hour, that I didn't want any trouble, that I was sure we could sort this out amicably. That was the word they used at times like these wasn't it? The holy grail of all unholy break ups, the amicable settlement?

She wasn't in. Her father was there instead, his silver Mercedes blocking the driveway and standing out like a battle-tank. He opened the door at our approach and stood obstructing the entrance, arms folded, making me feel like I was trespassing on my own property.

"Hello, Tom."

"Hi, Alan. Just came to get some things - personal stuff, you know. Clothes and that."

He was fumbling with a piece of paper which, eventually, he handed to me. "Sorry, Tom. Annie's quite a headstrong girl, as you know."

She'd written down all the stuff it was okay for me to touch - it wasn't much: clothes, shoes, toiletries. It was written in her best,

and most methodical hand, due care and consideration given to each item. I turned it over, thinking of other things, trivial things like the Biggles books my mum had bought me and I'd kept all these years. They weren't on the list. Was she saying I couldn't have them? My bottle of ten year old Kuros was fine but keep away from the Biggles books or I'll sue your ass, as they would say in America.

Phil came up and took the list. "Bollocks to that," he said, then pushed his way in.

Phil was a big lad with lots of muscle and the fact that he didn't say much lent him an air of menace which, according to Eleanor, was complete nonsense but people tended not to mess with him just in case. Alan took the same circumspect view and stepped aside.

"We'll be as quick as we can," I said.

What hit me first when I walked in were my children's shoes lying at the bottom of the stairs, such tiny shoes, I thought. And there, yesterday, in the living room, had been Annie and her be-suited, wide-arsed Alistair, twisting their fingers together on the sofa as they'd faced me.

"Just one of those things," she'd said. "I mean we've not been right for years, have we," and: "Let's be adults about this, Tom. It's for the best," and: "We can be amicable about this." And other set phrases gleaned from countless soap opera bust-ups which all roughly translated as: why make it hard for me, Tom? This is simply the way it's going to be.

She'd always been like that. When we'd first met it was what had drawn me to her. I'd always been so easy going and I'd found her forthright manner quite stunning. I'd met her at the Squash club,... hated every minute of the game itself right from the start, but I'd persevered for six months because the sight of her prancing about in her whites had driven me crazy.

"Could I take you out for a meal?" I'd asked her eventually.

"No," she'd replied, almost cutting my throat with a flick of her lovely blonde hair. "But I'll take you for one, okay?"

From the first, I'd thought her magnificent and beautiful. Then, fifteen years later I'd come home to find Alistair sitting beside her, cringing silently while I'd gazed open mouthed and felt,... nothing at all,... not I think because I didn't care, more because I couldn't believe any of it was really happening.

The shoes brought it home to me though,... the enormity of it. Whatever had happened between Annie and me, the love I felt for

the children was the same - it was instinctive and unconditional. Eleanor was right, I'd always be their father, but I was terrified that if I was not around, they would forget me. I wanted to take the shoes with me as a sort of anchor. I mean they had to be a part of me didn't they, if I had their shoes? But Alan who'd looked on calmly throughout, became suddenly nervous.

"It's only a pair of shoes," I said, but he stood up to me, his voice reverberating with all his boardroom bossiness. No way was I taking those bloody shoes and then as I emerged from my momentary madness, I saw it all: they weren't simply my children. There was a greater picture to be considered. They were his grandchildren, an integral part of the lives of Annie's family. I could squabble all I wanted over the Biggles books and my Joni Mitchell CDs but the children were a different matter. They were to be kept out of this, out of harm's way, out of my way if necessary; protected; best interests and all that. We could be amicable all we liked but mention the children and things would get very nasty, very quickly indeed.

I looked at the shoes as if I were looking at their faces. Why didn't I have a more recent photograph of my children?

"For fuck's sake, Tom," said Phil. "Leave em."

I came away with my Biggles books and my Joni Mitchell CD's and my bicycle and my printer and my CD ROMs and a half dozen bin bags containing my clothes and books and other bits and bobs, most of which I could probably have thrown away. In parting Alan offered me his hand which I took a moment to shake.

"Truly, I am sorry," he said, and I think on reflection, he really was.

"Tell Annie there'll be an estate agent round tomorrow to value the house," I said. "I'm staying at my dad's for a bit until she sorts herself out. I suppose she'll be moving in with this Alistair chap. Only she didn't say,..."

He looked down at his feet. He was suddenly uncomfortable, as if only now remembering it was Annie, his daughter, who'd taken a lover and not me. If it had been me, it might have been easier for him to deal with. "Is there anything I can do? " he asked. "Anything for the children? Any message perhaps?"

"No," I said. "I can't think of anything that would make sense to them. I won't argue about custody or anything - I mean the mother always gets them anyway doesn't she? And I never wanted the little

bastards in the first place. They were her idea."

I felt Phil's hand gripping my arm in warning. "He didn't mean that, mate," he said to Alan.

It was true. I hadn't meant it. Even from the outset, the children had always wielded an astonishing emotional power over me. Why had I said it then? To hurt him? To shock him? To shock me into waking up to the fact that it was all very, very real?

"Sorry Alan,... The kids couldn't hope for a better grandfather. You'll see they're okay?..."

I'd always liked Parbold. In spite of the inevitable sprawl of boxy housing throughout the sixties and the seventies, it had retained a sense of character with its remaining old stone buildings, it's converted windmill and its permanent regatta of colourful barges on the canal. From the centre you could walk in any direction, and within five minutes find yourself in deepest countryside, among the meadows, wild commons and wooded glades that marked the inland boundary of the Lancashire plain.

If your destination took you deeper inland, it meant climbing the long, unforgiving snake of a road up Parbold hill. It was no problem for a modern car, but in a Midget on a cold morning, or a clapped out van like Phil's it was more of an ordeal. We laboured up, eventually hitting bottom gear while trailing a noxious cloud of diesel, and we just about made it to the Wiggin Tree pub, on the summit. Here the road levelled out and Phil pulled in.

"Problem?" I asked

"Nothing a pint won't fix," he said.

It was quiet inside the Wiggin Tree, a calm relaxed air pervading the modern decor, quite unlike the last time I'd been in on a busy Saturday evening. We took a table overlooking a cornfield. It was swishing about in great lazy waves. The crop was ripe, its long ears of grain drooping sleepily. Already it was late August. Summer was coming to an end. Another month, I thought and there'd be Christmas cards in all the shops.

This time last year, we'd just returned from holiday in Ibiza, two weeks with the children, sun and sand and warm seas, and Annie in a yellow bikini, looking as trim as she had when I'd first met her. A year! Suddenly I found myself thinking I would never take life for granted again. Nothing stayed the same. Even the firmest foundations crumbled in time and it was folly to attach ourselves to anything,... or to anyone.

"You must think I'm stupid," I said.

He shrugged, quaffed down half his pint, but said nothing.

"My dad said I should have kicked her out. I suppose I should. I've always been too easy going."

He shook his head. "Your dad didn't mean it - he knows the score."

"Score?"

"It's all about children, isn't it? What's best for them. You don't want to kick them out. And like you said, the mother always gets the kids, so even if it's her who's been shagging around, she stays and you go. Simple. No offence."

"None taken," I said. "I mean, that's exactly what I thought."

Phil sat back and contemplated the rest of his pint.

"So how long were you at Standard's then?" I asked him.

"Twenty years," he replied. "I was a turner."

"A turner? You can name your price then these days."

He shrugged "A turner's a rare species all right, but there's no call for it any more."

"Isn't there?"

"Who'd want to hire a British turner when you can get it done for next to nothing in China? No, Tom. We're done making things in this country. I bet if you asked, not one of the soft-palmed bastards in this place could even tell you what a turner was."

"Maybe," I said. "Sad though."

"Just fact," he said and then he stabbed the table with a stubby finger as if to drive the point home. "No sense harping on about it though. Gotta face it. Gotta move on."

"True."

"You still at Derby's then? I heard they'd all but shut that place as well."

"They closed the machine shop years ago but there's still plenty of design work. It keeps me busy anyway. I heard you had a workshop or something."

"Just a side line. I salvaged a couple of machines when they were emptying Standard's - a Hardinge lathe and an old Cincinatti miller. I still do the odd freelance job - classic bike spares mainly."

"Ever done a re-bore on an engine?"

He laughed. "That bloody old Midget?"

I nodded.

He thought for a while. "Buy yourself a kit, then give me a bell."

"Thanks I owe you one."

"No, Tom. I owe you one."

"Me?"

"Our Ellie and your Dad." He shrugged and gulped down the rest of his pint. "Ellie was in a mess," he said. "I did what I could, but she was impossible to deal with. Now, your dad and her,...." he tapped the side of his head and lowered his voice. "They've been to the same places, in here, you know? It makes a difference. All I'm saying is you could have made it difficult - an older chap like that, and you his only son,..."

I'd missed my mother every day of the past twenty years but Eleanor was still the best thing that had happened to my father. "Come on, Phil. Eleanor's all right."

"She's better these days," he said. "But she'll never be all right."

While I was pondering what he might mean by this, a waitress came up to our table. She smiled, took our glasses and wanted to know if we fancied anything to eat. She was young and blonde, the same shade of purest platinum as Annie, but her name-tag read: Rachel.

"Rachel," I said.

"Yes?" she asked.

I looked up, startled. "Sorry. Nothing. It was just the name. Such a pretty name. Rachel."

She gave me another smile, though not as wide and went on her way.

"So, who's Rachel, then?" he asked.

I shook my head. "It was just some girl I used to know at school."

He smirked. "She must have been quite a girl."

"I hardly knew her."

Sure, I'd hardly known her, not *really* known her, but once more I was feeling the white heat of her presence and feeling again the ominous stirrings of everything she had ever meant to me. My life was falling apart before my eyes, and I was thinking of Rachel. It was insane! I had no time for this.

CHAPTER 5

She came back to me as I lay in bed that night. She was a head shorter than me, slight of frame and with short black hair combed in sweeping waves. She was wearing a navy blue skirt, cut to just above the knee as was the fashion then. Also she had on a regulation school blouse, sky blue with seventies style flared lapels, and a blue and gold striped tie done up into a fat knot. But it was her expressiveness more than anything that so captivated me - the tilt of her head, the slightly exaggerated movement of her hands as she spoke, and the nervous way she used to balance on the sides of her feet,...

It was a dream I'd had before, the first time when I was fifteen years old. In the dream I was conscious of her, of all these mannerisms, as I followed her along a corridor at school. We were making our way between classes, a weekly ritual,... that particular corridor, that particular class, the same time every week. The clamour of voices, the damp, dusty smell, the anxious feel of it,... all came back, bubbling up from the dark lake of my subconscious.

The dream was a reflection of reality, but in that reality I had always lost sight of her in the crowd and my chance of glory, of recognition, of hope borne afloat on the chance of a smile, had always evaporated. But in my dream, the sweaty crush of school blazers parted suddenly to reveal her leaning against the wall. As I drew level I realised her eyes were tracking me. She was waiting,... for me. And when I came to her, she fixed me with a steady gaze, bringing me to a standstill.

"I want to be with you," she said.

They were just words, but they might have been the most precious words, had she ever really spoken them. Of course it was just a dream and I remember the first time its cruel authenticity had me waking, delirious with a fragile joy, which imploded into a terrible despair. Even now, waking that morning, twenty five years later, its taste was fresh and it frightened me that a fantasy from so long ago could still wield such power.

I was still aware of her presence as I coaxed the Midget into work that morning. Why was she haunting me now? Was it simply my mind retreating away from the shock of Annie and fixating on something else by way of distraction? Would anything have done?

Was it something about the car? Something about the smell of it, a mixture of hot oil and musty carpets,.... stirring old memories?

Like my father had said, I'd driven an old Midget before. At eighteen, it was about the only sports car I'd been able to afford. I'd seen one advertised in the Clarion - a '67 registration, a classic or so the greasy little man had said, after he'd taken my three hundred quid.

"Needs a bit of work, like," he'd added. I'd noticed that. But it had sounded like a dream and its racing green paint had sparkled seductively beneath the feeble strip-light in his garage. I hadn't even thought to check the insurance premiums before I'd bought the damned thing - only to find out on later enquiry that even third-party cover was more than I'd paid for the car, and quite beyond my means as an apprenticed technician at Derby's Diesels.

The only time I'd ever driven it was on a brief, un-insured cruise down Langholm Avenue. The plan had been quite simple, though criminal in its recklessness: I'd see Rachel; she would be coming out of the house as I drove by; the top would be down and I'd cut a heroic figure in my flying jacket. I'd slow down, gunning the engine provocatively; she'd turn at the throaty sound of it and give me that look, that quizzical look; then she'd recognise me and her expression would change - eyes dancing, a little flirtatious: "I want to be with you," she'd say.

I didn't see her of course. Then, at the roaring junction with the A6 on the edge of town, the throttle jammed wide open and the car nearly rammed me into the side of a wagon. I'd had the sense to slip the clutch and cut the engine, but it had been a near thing and my father had gone berserk when I'd finally got it home.

It had sat on the drive for months after that, gathering grime and dripping oil, a constant reminder of the hopelessness of everything, and rather than save up to pay the insurance premium, I just sold it, then got on with my life.

It came as a shock remembering all of this now.

Today's Midget was a later marque, and in better condition. Its original black wrap-around bumpers had been stripped off at some stage and replaced with more traditional chrome. It had a neat grille from off some original sixties scrapper and I had a feeling the car had been loved, but had fallen recently on hard times. It was green, like the other and I'd bought it on impulse after seeing it on the forecourt of a second hand dealer's in Preston. Perhaps it had

been a hunger for nostalgia that had attracted me - but I wasn't aware I'd been thinking of Rachel.

Pulling into my slot outside the office, some wag shouted across an insult about the car having shrunk in the wash. "Bloody classic, this mate," I retorted while carefully smoothing down the broad band of Duct Tape that was holding the rag-top together. I'd have to get a new one before winter set in, I thought.

Once inside the air conditioned sterility of the open plan office, I logged onto my computer, checked my e-mails, then loaded up the latest version of the design I was working on - a simple valve for a marine engine, but Rachel was still with me and I found it impossible to concentrate. I made coffee and sipped at it while gazing without seeing at my computer screen. Then I tried quite deliberately to remember what I could of her, before realising most of it was irrelevant.

In the seventies, when I'd known, or rather not known her, the technology for a quartz watch had been beyond us, and indeed most of what I took for granted now was science fiction back then: E-mail, Pentium processors and personal telephones so small you could lose them amongst the small change in your pocket. For all the vividness of my memories, they were of events that had taken place a long time ago. A generation had passed. She would be in her forties now, maybe fat, wrinkled and grey. I was being haunted by a fantasy that was a quarter of a century out of date. It was meaningless. And it was maddening.

In the seventies, I'd been like the other lads,... shoulder length hair and flared trousers. Nowadays, the hair is disappearing over the top of my head, and the eyes are dim without my specs - yet inside I feel the same as I imagine I did then. How would I feel though, I wondered, if I actually saw Rachel today? I didn't suppose for a moment she'd recognise me, but would I recognise her? And if I did see her, or more importantly saw the change in her, would I be able at last to rid myself of this strange feeling?

"Got that document ready, Tom?"

"Document?"

It was Stavros, the section head.

"We talked about it last week? The departmental reshuffle? We need your thoughts on the way ahead."

"Sure, only I'm a bit tied up on this valve right now. We got the prototype back and the flow's not right. I'll need to reshape the

inlet."

As I spoke, I was aware of Stavros' eyes glazing over. He wasn't technically minded, and even though without the valve, a two million pound contract was as good as dead, he didn't seem interested. "Can't Joss do that?" he asked a little wearily.

"By the time I've explained it to Joss, I could have done it myself."

"Well, I really need your input for this afternoon's session, Tom."

I couldn't do both at the same time and he wouldn't actually say he thought the technical work on the valve was less important. It was one of those lose-lose situations with which all office drones,... even technical ones are familiar. Dutifully, I zapped the valve model and opened M.S. Word, loading a document I'd begun only last week,... already a lifetime ago.

"The Way Ahead," I read. But what about my own way ahead? Bugger Derby's: Where did Tom Norton go from here? While I pondered on it, Charlie Wheeler returned from the purchasing office. He was a sour faced engineer of some thirty years experience. "That's it," he said, addressing no one in particular. "The design office is moving to Paris. Administration's going to Dartford. They're shutting us down - three month's for the lot of us."

He was a gossip, a man for a good rumour and we didn't take much notice because we'd heard this sort of thing from him before.

I gave a cynical sneer. "Who says?"

"It's all round Purchasing. They're having a session this afternoon. Haven't you seen that Jag outside? Old Whacker 'imself's come to make the announcement."

Whacker was the Chief Executive, not his real name of course but it's what everyone called him on account of his stern headmaster's demeanour. He dropped in from time to time, but mostly he plied his mysterious trade from a poky little office with a posh address in London. "That can't be right," I said "Stavros' just asked me to finish this thing on the way ahead. Why would he be wasting his time with that if they were shutting us down?"

Charlie gave me a grin and shook his head at my innocence - with only twenty five years service, I was still a bit green. "That's local, Tom. That's trivial. What I'm talking about comes from headquarters. Stavros probably knows as much about this as we do."

Stavros returned an hour later, somewhat pale faced. With an

effort he heaved his well padded frame onto a desk at the head of the office. It was a peculiar sight, one without precedent, him stood up there like a reluctant schoolmaster, waving his arms for silence and I felt at once it's import, felt at once the shock-wave of doom even before he opened his mouth.

Charlie winked at me, then nudged my elbow. "What did I tell you, lad? It's tickets to a dance."

"A dance? "

"Aye, a redun-dance. "

CHAPTER 6

I'd been at Derby's Diesels since leaving school - seen it through many changes and felt a part not so much of the place, which was without exception ugly and dirty, but more of the people who worked there. Derby's had taken me as a youth with a couple of 'O' levels, trained me as an engineer and paid for my degree. Now they didn't want me any more - the world had changed, become more dynamic. Old Whacker would keep his office in London and his Jaguar. So far as we could work out, the Dartford factory would survive, for now, but it was the Job Centre for the rest of us.

There'd been a time at Derby's when nothing changed for decades. People did the same jobs, only getting promotion when the bloke above them either retired or dropped dead. The design office had been in the same place for thirty years, its brass door handles worn smooth by the palms of a generation of engineers - but now, suddenly, it was moving to Paris.

They say it's rare to find anyone in the same job for longer than five years these days, but it's not true. I knew lots. I was one. Derby's was the ladder I'd chosen as I picked my way through life, along with hundreds of other lads in and around Middleton. Derby's and Annie. They were the two immutable markers by which I had navigated every course. Now both had gone and in the space of an afternoon, I found myself completely adrift, searching for something safe, something sure, yet still I seemed unable to come up with anything more tangible than memories of the time when I'd first set out this way at seventeen, a time when I'd been mulling over the collapsed hopes of Langholm Avenue, and Rachel.

My father expressed his feelings better than me.

"Fukin ell," he said.

Eleanor closed her eyes in disbelief. "Oh, Tom, that's terrible news!"

"It's okay - I've got twenty five years in - I'll get a decent payout,... and I'll find another job." But my confidence was a bluff, a brave face. I really had no idea what I would do. It felt like I was riding a barrel,... and I was afraid.

My father was keen to emphasise the seriousness of my situation. "Another job? You'll be lucky. You're over forty."

I didn't feel over forty. And anyway what was wrong with being

over forty? It wasn't as if I was going senile or anything.

"Wake up, Tommy, lad. You're on the scrapper."

"But they don't discriminate against age these days. They can't."

He shook his head wearily. "Tom, listen. Someone tells a twenty year old kid to jump and the kid asks how high? A bloke of forty's going to think twice, he's going to think about his family, about himself. Maybe he'll turn round to his gaffer who won't be much over twenty five anyway and tell him to fuck off. Of course they discriminate! I was in my fifties when I left the pit, but I might as well have been ninety the way they used to look at me when I turned up for an interview!"

I stared at him. This was the father I'd forgotten, the man I'd seen preaching a belly full of ire to a marshalling yard packed with bitter miners, the same man who'd hurled bits of coal in defiance at baton wielding riot police in the crazy days of the eighties.

"Jack's right," said Eleanor. "It won't be easy. You've got to think this through."

My father moved to the window and looked across to where a pack of ragged kids were kicking a ball up against someone's garage door.

"Little bastards," he said, almost to himself. It was a prelude, I thought, and I could tell by the look in his eyes he was thinking about something else. Then he told me Annie had telephoned, that she wasn't happy about selling the house, that I should go over and talk about it with her and the wide arsed Alistair. But I had already dismissed Annie from my mind and I didn't want to have to think of her again.

"I can't be bothered," I said, evasively.

"You have to go, Tom," said Eleanor.

My father nodded. "And Ellie had better go with you," he said. " I don't want them taking you for any more of a mug than they have already. I'd go myself but with my temper I'd only make things worse."

I bridled a bit at that. After all, I was old enough to look after myself, but then I realised I hadn't made such a good job of things, and also I was afraid of them - of Annie and Alistair, afraid of what further pain they might inflict. The children? You'll never see them again Tom, and it's all your fault!

I found Eleanor later in my old room, sitting on the bed, a duster in one hand while she leafed through my old school sketch book.

"These are lovely," she said.

"Oh, they're all pretty old. Look you don't have to come with me. I'll be okay."

"Are you saying you don't need a friend? "

"I'm saying I'll be okay. "

"Let me be your friend, Tom." She paused on a charcoal portrait I'd done of Farrah Fawcet, one I'd copied from a photograph in the TV Times. "That's good," she said. "I remember that look she had."

The lines and proportions were precise, the definition of light and shade well rendered. I hadn't seen it for a while and, in all modesty, it surprised me,... not just the accuracy of it but also how well I'd captured her screen persona. "Look at the date," I said in astonishment. "Nineteen seventy eight." I pulled another sketch book from the trunk I'd brought over from Parbold. Then I sank on the bed and handed it to her. "Now take a look at this one."

She flicked through the pages. The subjects were the same, and the inspiration - anything curvy, romantic and voluptuous,.. women,... plants, landscapes. The difference was in the dates, a decade or so later and in the style.

"They're fine," she said.

But she was being polite. The forms were not as well observed, the rendering of shadow and light was sloppy and hurried. The things I'd drawn had begun as serious observations, but had all ended up deformed and sterile, as if a vital sense had died.

"They're hopeless," I said "I didn't keep it up."

"It's a shame. Your dad said you were really into it at school, that you could have gone on and studied it at college. Why didn't you?"

"It all seemed a bit airy fairy. I reckoned maybe one in twenty art students went on to make a living at it. The odds were a bit better with engineering."

"This last one here says nineteen eighty seven - that's Princess Di,..."

"But I've made her look ugly. I'd completely lost it by then."

"You've done nothing since?"

"Just bits of sketches - nothing on the scale of these." I picked up the sketch book from my schooldays. "These," I said, "these are drawings."

Eleanor turned to the front page of the later sketch book. "Perhaps it’s because you didn't write Rachel's address in this one."

"There came a point when it seemed a bit foolish to carry on doing that. I suppose it was when I finally let her go."

"Oh, I don't think you've ever let her go, Tom."

"Sure I have."

"After what you did the other day? I don't think so! But you're right about one thing, you did lose something on the way from that book to this one."

"I grew up."

"No. You seemed more to lose your sense of poetry." She took up the early sketch book again. "This is poetry. And perhaps the poetry began to die when you gave up on the idea of Rachel."

"If that's true, there's not much I can do about it."

"Why don't you take it up again? I don't mean to make a living at it or anything,... I mean, just for yourself. For you, Tom. " She opened the book at the drawing of Farrah Fawcet. "See if you can't get back to this."

CHAPTER 7

Eleanor liked the Midget and had us drive the ten miles to Parbold with the top down, even though it was spitting with rain. Let me be your friend, she'd said and I was glad to, for she possessed such a precious air of serenity, almost as if she were sedated, which perhaps she was, some of the time. If only some of that serenity might rub off on me, I thought! Annie had Alistair, and the weight of her educated and articulate family behind her. Me? Well, all of a sudden it seemed I had Eleanor.

When we came over Parbold Hill the vastness of the plain appeared before us, its patchwork of towns and meadows stretching all the way to the sea some fifteen miles away. It had always felt good at the end of a long day to come home this way, to crest the hill and see it all laid out like that - but not any more. Now it was like standing at the edge of a precipice.

"You can see Ormskirk from here," she said. "Me and Phil - we were brought up in Ormskirk."

"Really?"

"But that was before," she added.

"Before?"

"Before I went crazy."

"Eleanor, you're the sanest person I know."

"Then you must be crazy too."

I knew little about her life before she met my father, and she had offered nothing to fill in the gaps. Also, I'd always been too self conscious to probe, afraid of triggering some emotional response and, in a selfish way, not being able to cope with it, to cope with her tears, or with any deep seated need she might have.

There had been some trouble in her life - I knew that. You could see it in her eyes, sense it in the way she moved, in the strange way she dressed. There had been a spell in hospital, perhaps a long one - a breakdown of some sort, but whether it had been caused by a trauma, or just a sickness to which she was prone, like so much else about her,.. I did not know.

This was the first time I'd heard talk of a home, any hint she had a past at all. There were no parents, no aunts, no uncles, no friends from her thirty five years of life,... all cut out and gone - just Eleanor and the taciturn Phil, who'd tried and failed by his own

admission to help her.

As we dropped down the mile-long hill towards the village, the engine hit a peculiar resonance and the exhaust began to rattle.

"Sounds like the baffles are going," I said and as I spoke I was aware of my nerves tightening, aware that we were drawing nearer to Annie, to the source of everything that was slowly killing me. "Phil said he'd help me re-bore the engine. I've been getting some bits together - it'll be like new when I've finished."

"It'll be good for you to have a focus, Tom," she said as she squeezed my arm. "But be careful about getting too close to Phil, eh?"

I made the familiar turn into Lindley Crescent to find Annie's Corsa and an old 3 series BMW parked across the gates. I'd lived there for fifteen years, painted the gutters, tended the garden and spent the last two summers block-paving the drive. All of a sudden though, I felt like an alien in a place I'd been so familiar with only a few weeks ago.

I left the MG across the street and followed Eleanor up the drive. There were familiar voices, manic voices and the pattering of feet as the children came tearing around the back of the house. I had not thought I'd hear those voices, those energetic sounds, today. Surely, Annie would have kept them away? What was she thinking of, having them running around when all this was going on?

Stephen drew up short and pointed his little spade at me. "Where've you been?"

"Hi-ya Spud,... I've been helping Grandpa."

"No you haven't. Grandpa's at work."

"Sorry,... I meant Jack."

Then Gemmie appeared, slutched up to her elbows and with a headless Barbie in her hand.

"I've got a new friend," she said in her best, bossy little madam voice. "He's mummy's friend too because she lets him go to beddy-byes same as you." Then, oblivious of the knife she'd just stuck between my ribs, she turned wide eyed to the tall, black sheathed figure of Eleanor. "Hi-ya witchipoo." she said.

Eleanor opened out her arms and twirled slowly. "Hello little girl. Are there any spells you'd like me to cast for you?"

"Mend my dolly's head," she said. "Stevie pulled it off."

"Didn't,..."

"Did,..."

"Very well," said Eleanor. "Then shall we turn Stevie into a frog."

Both shrieked with joy at the idea and Stephen bounced away making croaking noises.

Eleanor always seemed so natural with them it surprised me there had never been any children of her own.

By now the front door had opened and Annie was waiting. She had on a pair of jeans and a baggy sweater. She looked good, like she'd stepped from the cover of a magazine, except she also looked sour and as usual it tied my stomach in knots. It had me wondering what I could do to please her, to melt that sourness, to make her smile, to make her pleased with me.

"What's she doing here?" she said.

"Hi," said Eleanor, ignoring the slight. "It's lovely to see you too, Annie."

Inside, we found Alistair sitting on the sofa, his eyes darting nervously as if all he wanted to do was run. Annie sat by him and at once their fingers became entwined. I had a vision then of their legs similarly entangled - her lovely smooth legs wrapped around his thighs and his great hairy bum pumping up and down. I felt desperate and sick and made to back away, to run, but felt a timely hand grip my elbow. Then I turned to meet the secret and encouraging gaze of Eleanor.

"You already know Tom," Annie told Alistair. "And this is his... friend, Eleanor."

The word friend was spoken with a peculiar emphasis at which Eleanor rolled her eyes and in spite of everything, she made me smile.

"I'm his step-mother, actually," said Eleanor, seeking to clarify things.

Alistair smiled uncertainly and it worried me that I didn't hate him. Why couldn't I summon up the blinding rage that should have come so naturally? After all, had he not deceived me? Had he not made love to Annie, made her moan with the delicious agony of sex, when I hadn't been allowed to touch her properly in years?

Annie was sitting arms folded now. "Listen," she said. "I want the house. I want the bank accounts. I want everything. You can't refuse. It's not for me - it's for the children. You wouldn't deny them the security would you?"

Until now I hadn't thought about the financial side of things, not daring to raise my sights above the level of old sketchbooks and

computers, so this came as something of a blow and seemed so unreasonable I could hardly believe she was serious.

"Eh?..."

She remained grim faced. "I'm seeing a solicitor on Monday," she said. "I think you should do the same."

"Annie, you can have the house," I said and I felt Eleanor stiffen beside me in alarm. "You pick up my share of the mortgage, as of this month. Fine. I can arrange that."

"What about the savings account?"

"Sure, that too. There's only a couple of grand in it anyway. It's yours. I'll switch my salary to another bank. We'll sort something out over the kids of course."

"No," she said. "You have to pay your share of the house. Do you think I can manage this place on my own?"

"But surely,... I mean,... I assumed since you'd started all of this, and since he was here, he'd be paying his share,... or you'd both be moving out,... moving somewhere else,... together."

This seemed logical and pragmatic to me. It might not have been what the law would advise or what we'd all finish up with in the end, but I thought it a good place to start - at least from off the top of my head.

Annie crumpled then. It was unexpected and it put me off driving my point home. She folded slowly into Alistair's lap and she cried. She hadn't a clue what was right or wrong. Life had been so simple for both of us until now. Perhaps that was how she'd viewed her affair with Alistair, too. Perhaps it had begun simply, with an innocent flirtation, then moved on to stolen kisses, then a hasty assignation in back of his car,... a hotel room, maybe.

But things were not so simple any more.

The last time I'd made love to her had been the result of a week of undignified pestering and even then, she'd just laid there quietly while I'd got on with it. I'd felt ashamed afterwards, almost as if I had raped her - which in a sense I suppose I had. It was hardly the sign of a healthy marriage. Sure, there had been a distance between us for a long time. Something had died, but only now, watching her with Alistair, did I realise any of this. We had been together because it was part of a pattern, a routine. We woke up, we saw to the children, we went to work, went to bed. We had long ago ceased doing it because we wanted to be with one another.

Eleanor stood up slowly. I saw Alistair looking at her. She

puzzled him I think, as she puzzled most people, but also I believe the horny bastard was wondering how easy she was.

Finally he closed his eyes and shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "This is such a mess. We didn't mean for any of it to happen."

It was the first time I'd heard him speak. He had a northern accent, Manchester or maybe Oldham, softened by education and maybe a prolonged spell down south. At last, I flared at him. "You mean you thought you'd just go on shagging behind my back?"

But it was a half hearted thing. He might easily have buried me with his retort, except Eleanor shot me a warning glance and stepped between us. Then the kids came thundering in, grinding mud into the carpet from off their wellies. It wound me up like it always did, but then I realised it didn't matter any more. It wasn't my problem. I'd no longer have to get on my hands and knees and scrape it up when they'd gone to bed. That was Alistair's job now.

Gemmie noticed Annie was crying, but didn't say anything and instead, looked to Eleanor for reassurance. Eleanor pointed a long, black tipped finger at Gemmie. "Pop and Crisps," she demanded. "Show me."

Unlike with most adults, Gemmie was enchanted by Eleanor's eccentricity. "All right," she said.

I stuck it out while Eleanor entertained the children in the kitchen, but eventually they grew sensitive at being excluded and ended up jumping all over us. We got nowhere and I wondered if Annie was smart enough to have planned it that way.

Finally, I said we'd better leave it a few weeks while things settled down. But I knew even then, there'd be nothing to say. All our talk of an amicable solution meant nothing more than a desire that it would all just go away without either of us having to get involved.

"You've some more stuff on the hall table," said Annie, as I prepared to leave.

"Chuck it," I said.

"They were photographs and things. I thought you'd want them."

"Just chuck the bloody things."

But later, as I fixed up the hood on the Midget, I saw Eleanor carrying the stuff in a Morrison's bag.

We sat a while then, squashed shoulder to shoulder in the car as a sudden rain shower swept the street, great waves of it lashing down and drumming on the rag-top. I shivered, she put her arm

around me and, instinctively, I leaned against her. It was a peculiar feeling and I had always been shy of doing it before, shy of touching her, but right then with the world in ruins and the rain bouncing off the rag-top, it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

"Annie hasn't a clue," she said. "She's floundering."

"But she'll be okay," I said. "Her dad'll see to that."

"I know. Jack's told me about him. He owns all those clothes shops."

"That's right."

"I went in one once - that place in Southport. It was all string vests and clown pants as far as I could see. Black was definitely passé back then, though I believe it's considered cool again now. Still, you'd better watch out, or you'll lose everything except your knickers, and probably those as well. You all right for money, honey? I mean is there anything just in your name?"

"I have some shares I can cash in."

"Got the certificates?"

"I think so. They're with all that stuff I brought over the other day."

"Good," she said. "Cash them. Don't bank them. Keep the money in a sock, anywhere it can't be traced. Then switch your salary like you said, as soon as you can. And draw it out the minute it's paid in. Every penny. Understand?"

"I don't get it."

"Anyone with the right authority can get their hands on computer digits, Tom. Cash is harder. With cash they have to physically make you hand it over. Don't give in. Don't make it easy for them."

"You sound like you've done this before."

She smiled mysteriously, then gave me one last encouraging squeeze. "Let's get out of here. " She said. Then she eyed the houses around us with distaste. "You don't need this place any more."

As I drove, she began flicking through the stuff she'd rescued, stopping eventually at an old form photograph. "That's you! Just look at that hair, you scruffy beggar! I bet your poor mother had to bite her tongue, sending you out looking like that."

The engine was knocking and spluttering, struggling against the brutal incline of Parbold Hill. By the time we crested the summit, I fancied I could hear the engine's death rattle, prior to a blown head

or a smashed valve. After coaxing it on, I glanced over to the picture on Eleanor's lap, then pulled in suddenly so I could take a closer look. It was one face in particular that had taken my eye. She was standing on the row behind me - bright eyed, proud, smiling.

It was Rachel.

Though I was not aware of having retained the memory, it came back to me now and I lived again the morning the photograph had been taken - the lads all jostling and mucking about and the girls standing patiently, looking on, their interest in us hidden behind masks of disdain.

Eleanor seemed to approve. "So that's her!"

"I tried to work it so I was standing right behind her. I had this idea that every time she picked herself out of that picture, I'd be right there - or that her parents would see it and say to her 'who's that fine looking young man?' and 'why don't you invite him round to tea?'"

She laughed. "Poor Tom. You really had it bad."

"The photographer ruined it," I went on. "He wanted me sitting down on the front row because I was so tall."

Eleanor continued admiring the picture. "So, there she is! Oh, she's very pretty, Tom."

"She was. Who knows what she looks like now?"

"I was beautiful too," she said. "At that age."

"You still are," I told her.

"No. I meant on the inside."

"So did I."

She shook her head. "You don't really know me."

"My dad married you. You can't be all that bad."

"Your dad's very kind."

"No, he's a grumpy old git and you're a saint to put up with him."

"He doesn't mean it. That gruffness,... it's just an act. He understands things very well. He's really very sensitive. You know that too."

"If you say so."

"When we met, he knew he was my only hope. I could offer him nothing in return - except my company. I owe my life to him."

"Don't run yourself down, Eleanor. The way I see it, it was you who saved him."

She smiled. "When you let your guard down, you're just like

him, you know? Don't let this business with Annie harden you or change you in any way, Tom. Promise me. I like you exactly the way you are"

I blushed, flattered to think anyone had been aware of me, that anyone would even want to know me.

"I'll be fine," I said and I hid my embarrassment in closer scrutiny of the picture.

It was a very good photograph - taken by a large format camera, the likes of which we don't see much these days, and the detail was superb. Already I was thinking I could scan it into my father's PC and get a decent blow up of her face.

"Anyway," said Eleanor. "What's green and oozes out from under a rusty old car?"

"I don't know - antifreeze I suppose. Why?"

She raised a delicately pencilled eyebrow. The radiator had burst.

CHAPTER 8

I remember how much I'd worried about buying the house. You see, at the age of twenty six, the most complicated thing I'd ever done before was buy a car. It wasn't so much the money and the thought of what I'd be owing the building society for the better part of my life. It was more the complexity - the surveys, the solicitors, the stamp duty, the contracts,... and a feeling I simply wasn't big enough to cope with all that arcane detail. But of course everything just seemed to fall into place. There were people whose job it was to understand these things for me. All I had to do was sign on the dotted lines that were presented to me, and keep my fingers crossed.

I suppose I should not have been surprised then to discover the breaking up of a marriage was equally routine. From the moment Eleanor introduced me to Mr. Hawksworth, of Hawksworth and Barker on Saint Thomas' road in Middleton, I realised I just had to play my part. There was a well established procedure in such matters, or so Hawksworth assured me. He'd put the papers in order and write the necessary letters. That was his job, what I'd be paying him for.

"So, me and Annie, we just sort of withdraw from the ring and let you get on with it?"

He was a plump, round faced man in his sixties, and he possessed a relaxed, confident air. "In a manner of speaking, yes," he said. "I'll contact your wife's solicitor." He looked down at the official and, I'd thought ominous, letter that had dropped through my letter box that morning. "Yes, it's a Liverpool firm - I've dealt with them before. Terrible business of course, very sad. You have my deepest sympathy. There will be an appointment in court regarding the settlement of your finances, and it would be wise for you to attend that, otherwise you may put your mind at rest. Everything is in hand, Mr Norton."

It seemed a fashionable thing, to have a solicitor. "You'll get a letter from my solicitor," people would say, a proprietorial tone in their voice as if referring to some old family retainer who hung on their every whim, straining at the leash to pounce on anyone who dared cross them. The reality of course was somewhat different. The last solicitor I'd seen had been about buying the house and I don't

think we'd spoken for more than ten minutes, some scruffy haired, seedy chap who'd only been interested in the fee and hanging on to my deposit for the house for as long as possible. "It was in hand," those were his words as well, as if to say: "What was I worrying about? Now go away and let me get on with something else".

Hawksworth knew Eleanor from some previous business, though what I could not imagine and it was she who'd brought me here after she'd found me sitting pale and drained nursing the letter in my lap that morning.

"He's all right," she'd assured me on the way over. "He's a gentleman. He'll sort you out."

Afterwards, she bought me coffee and a slice of carrot cake in the tea rooms on Main Street. It was disconcerting, I thought, the way people looked at her. It wasn't just the way she dressed, it was the way she moved, the way she held herself. Sometimes I imagined she seemed to float, as if a part of what tied her to the ground had been lost.

"Do I embarrass you?" she asked, as we sat face to face, huddled like conspirators over our table.

"What? Don't be daft. I'm sorry if I was staring. It wasn't really at you. It was more at other people, looking at you."

She thought about that for while and I was concerned I'd offended her - not thinking clearly, still in a bit of a daze after the interview with Hawksworth.

"I know I look a little weird," she said. "I have this thing about feeling invisible. I like to know people can see me, but sometimes they go too far. I just wish they wouldn't gawk. Children can't help it, but those old dears over there,...." She turned and the gaggle of gawking old dears snatched their eyes back to their table top.

"They can't help it," I said. "And Gemmie thinks you're wonderful."

She smiled fondly. "Gemmie's a love. She has a look of Jack, don't you think?" Then her face darkened. "As for Annie, she thinks I'm an old man's whore. They all do."

"Ellie,...."

"Well, why wouldn't they? And those old dears over there would say so too if they knew."

"Ellie,... I shouldn't be hearing this."

"And don't call me Ellie,.... Everyone calls me Ellie, since I was a little girl and I've always hated it - it's like they can't be bothered

with my proper name, like they can't be bothered with me."

"I'm sure that's not true."

"You always call me Eleanor, though. I've always liked that, Tom. There are three syllables to it and you take the time to pronounce every one. Don't change, don't let the way others call me, or think of me, influence you. Promise?"

There was a sensitivity there, I thought - a first glimpse of a vulnerability. I glanced away, awkwardly, wanting to know, wanting to hear her story but feeling at the same time inadequate, even unworthy. "I promise. Now, let me pay for these." I called the waitress over and pulled out my wallet. It fell open with the newly enlarged and computer enhanced picture of Rachel uppermost. The waitress, a pleasant middle aged woman, fastened upon it at once. "What a lovely looking girl. Your daughter?"

Before I could say otherwise, Eleanor answered for me. "She's our eldest. Isn't she pretty?"

"How old?"

"Fifteen."

"Mine's that age. Poor thing. Thinks she's got it all worked out,... but she doesn't know the 'alf of it does she?"

This was Rachel we were discussing and it came a shock when I realised it was true, that's all she was, just a child - the photograph, like my memory, freezing her in time. Pretty though she was, she was not sexually alluring. She was just a skinny, flat chested, fifteen year old school girl.

Outside, I waited on the street corner for ten minutes while Eleanor visited the butcher's shop for our tea. Then she linked arms with me and we headed back to the car.

"Thanks," I said.

"For what?"

"Being a mate."

"What are mother's for?" she replied. "But I'm worried you seem to be distancing yourself. Yesterday with Annie and Alistair, anyone else would have ripped his head off and you just sat there like you'd been invited round for tea. I thought it was a bit weird."

"Can you imagine me ripping anyone's head off?"

"No, but you seem more concerned about bending to suit whatever it is that Annie wants."

"I don't know what Annie wants. I wish I did."

"It simple, Tom. What Annie wants is the hunky Alistair sitting

in your place, and without disturbing anything else in her life. So, what about you? What do you want?"

"I don't know. Annie, I suppose. I want her to say it was all a big mistake and tell me that she loves me."

"Do you? Really?"

"Why not? I mean, that's what it's all about isn't it? Growing old with someone and doing your best for the kids?"

"Is that all you think your life has to offer?"

"What else is there?"

"Are you still in love with her?"

"Who? Oh,... Annie. I suppose I must be,..." But even as I said it, I knew I had already proved to myself I was not.

I looked across the road at a doddery old couple - their arms linked as they made slow but mutually steady progress against a tide of pedestrians heading the other way. They'd probably done their courting in the war years, I thought,... seen more heartache and upheaval than any of us could imagine, and they were still together. What was it about us these days I wondered that made us so volatile, so eager to move on to pastures new?

"I thought we were doing okay," I said. "People manage don't they, even if love dies they still manage a sort of affectionate companionship or something. You can't have everything."

"Annie wanted more, Tom. She wanted excitement, love, sex,... Sorry, I didn't mean to imply that,..."

"No, you're right. We didn't have any of those, not even the sex, well not lately anyway. I thought she'd just lost interest. I thought it was something that happened to women as they neared forty and I'd have to learn to live with it. Anyway, whatever I want, or thought I wanted, it's obvious I'm not going to get it, so isn't it easier on everyone, especially me if she gets what she wants? Did you really think Alistair was hunky?"

She rolled her eyes. "Of course he was. I also got the feeling he would have had my knickers off in five minutes if I'd let him. Bit of a lad our Alistair, I think - trust me, women have an intuition about these things, Tom. So, he's going to hurt Annie, maybe even before the ink's dry on your divorce papers."

"You think so? You think maybe it's worth waiting a bit? You think it might blow over?"

"I don't know for sure Tom, but you've got to think really hard about whether, or not you feel you can ever trust her again."

"I know,.... So I'm, not a hunk, then?"

"Are you asking me as your mother?"

"Whatever."

"Not every woman want's a hunky man, Tom. Maybe for a quick shag they do - pardon my French. But the less hunky types sometimes provide other things - things that are perhaps more important to a woman,... to the right woman."

"I'll take that as a no, then."

"By the way," she said, handing me a large paper bag. It was delicately patterned with wallflowers and smelled of potpourri. "I bought you a present."

I looked inside to find an expensively bound sketch book. I didn't know what to say at first so I flipped through the virgin sheets and ran my fingertips over their surface. It was the finest quality paper, better than anything I'd ever owned. "Eleanor,... this must have cost a fortune."

"Well, I'm not short of a bob or two."

"I'd be afraid to make a mark in this; it's beautiful."

"Make your mark," she said. "And when it's full I'll buy you another."

At home, we found my father browsing the job averts in the Evening Post.

"There's plenty of time for that," I said.

"I wasn't looking for you," he snapped. "This is research - counting how many manufacturing jobs there are as opposed to the service sector,.... how many full time proper jobs, how many short contract, part time sweat shop jobs."

"And? "

"You don't want to know," he said. "Not in your predicament."

"I could always retrain, and get a job at the burger-bar in the precinct."

"You're too old," he sniped. "By about a quarter of a century."

"Thanks for those words of comfort, Dad."

Eleanor leaned over and kissed the top of his head. "Come on you two,... honestly. It's like I've got two kids sometimes."

In the days that followed, it seemed as if I was shrinking back into my boyhood, lounging on the bed in the evenings, in my old room,... reading, thinking, waiting,.... waiting for Derby's to close and for the next stage in my divorce.

The room had been a bit of a dump when I'd first arrived,... a

convenient place for hiding junk, but that had been taken in hand now and each night, when I returned from work it was to find some new improvement - the curtains washed and pressed, clean sheets on the bed, and a new duvet cover.

The carpet always seemed freshly hoovered, and my clothes from the night before had always been gathered up by Eleanor's unseen hand, and spirited away,... fresh clothes appearing washed and ironed in the drawers. Then, one evening, I came home to find she'd dug out an old picture frame and made a mount for it out of cardboard. She'd decorated it with coloured pencil, an intricate pattern of romantic figures, dark robed and pouting - very Pre-Raphaelite - and she'd stuck a copy of Rachel's photograph in the frame before setting it on my bedside.

My short-wave radio appeared from somewhere as well. I think my father must have fished it out of the shed and Eleanor had polished it with Mr Sheen. It was thirty years old, the most advanced component in it being a transistor and it crackled nostalgically as I spun the dials in search of English speaking stations. I kept the radio on the bedside table along with the photograph and the sketch book Eleanor had bought me.

It was a beautifully bound book, the hard covers being decorated with a dense Paisley pattern. Once or twice I'd opened it with the intention of beginning a drawing, but after an age of staring at the blank page, my motivation had always fled, leaving me afraid to make the first mark, afraid to expose what I felt was my inadequacy.

Suddenly my awareness of the past was so great, I half expected to get up in the mornings and have to wheel my bike out of the shed, ready for the twenty minute ride to County High. And over the coming weeks, memories began pouring into my brain, as if someone had punched holes in time,... events, feelings, the smell of dusty corridors,... the feel of wet trousers on rainy school mornings. It made me wonder what it had all been for - all that hope, all that time spent working for something, something to lead me away from this room, and now, at forty-two, I was right back where I had started from. But of course, it wasn't quite the same, and the difference was Eleanor.

Eleanor and my father were cosy together, like an old married couple, or like brother and sister - she being by far the older and more sensible of the two. She would sit in at nights with her music

and her meditation, while he tapped away at his computer, and sometimes they'd be together on the sofa watching a movie - Eleanor curled into him, his arm around her shoulders, hugging her to him. They were easy,... contented, either apart or together - but there were twin beds in their room and my father had been impotent for twenty years. It was the eighties strike that had finished him, ending his life underground a broken man, his mind shattered, not by facing down the daily fear of a roof fall or a methane explosion, but by the strange little click every time he picked up the telephone to call a union meeting.

"Too bloody right I took the money," he said.

And into this cosiness, I began to unwind, becoming careless of my manners with Eleanor, as if she really were my mother, or my sister. But it pulled me up sharp one morning when, bleary-eyed, I walked into the bathroom wearing nothing but my shorts, to see her stepping out of the shower. She gave a little gasp and I spun round quickly, averting my eyes.

But it's amazing how much the eye can capture in an instant. She had a very potent figure, long and curvy with a pale skin. And there were generous breasts whose dark tips almost matched the colour of her hair. She hadn't made to cover herself right away. She'd just smiled as if to say 'oops' and then I think she'd become aware of where my eyes had strayed. Her hand moved down then, protectively but it was too late; I had already seen the crescent shaped scar - a thin line, whiter even than the white of her skin. Annie had a similar one, so I knew exactly what it was - a caesarean scar.

I was so embarrassed I could not meet her gaze over breakfast. But when my father had gone back up to his study, and before I left for Derby's, she dropped a hand onto mine. "It was nothing," she said. "Forget it."

"I should have knocked."

"You shouldn't worry about it. I've got nothing you haven't seen before."

True, I thought. But she also had something I had not expected to see, something she'd been sensitive about,... and more aware of exposing even than her sex.

CHAPTER 9

Eventually, I decided to follow where my feelings were leading. I dressed myself in a jacket and tie, which came as close as I could manage to a school uniform, and after pulling my old bike out of the shed, I set off along the old route for County High. It was September now, the morning was bright but with a breath of autumn in it, reminding me of all those first weeks back after the long summer break, and I was reminded too of a peculiar mix of sadness and nervous anticipation of the new term.

The first thing I discovered was that it was not a high school any more. That particular title had been misleading, even in the seventies, a crude marketing ploy to raise its head above the alleged mediocrity of an upstart comprehensive system. It was a Beacon School now, according to the notice board. I had no idea what that meant, but the kids looked and sounded just the same as they had to me twenty five years ago. They tore past on their bikes yelling abuse at one another, their blazers flapping in the wind, their quick fire banter like the chatter of machine guns and I almost felt myself one of them again.

Standing outside the gates, I watched these children scampering semi-wild into the same buildings I had known, and in my mind I followed them. I heard the roar of their footsteps on wooden stairs, heard the swish of school bags being kicked across polished floors. I felt their jostling, their pushing and the sheer press of them, carrying me along.

Then I was in a queue, squashed against the wall in the science block, boys down one side, girls down the other. I was fifteen years old and feeling Rachel's presence like the heat from a fire. It was a moment of hope, the promise of which had dragged me from my bed that morning, an occasion when our movements throughout the regulated school week came together. After days of anticipation, our orbits had closed and we were in sight and sound of one another again.

I was looking at her, not openly, more out of the corner of my eye. She was holding her folders against her breast and she was balancing on the sides of her feet, the toes of her navy blue shoes all scuffed. It was a sort of nervous energy and it seemed to fill her from the inside, making her shine. Meanwhile, as I watched, I was

willing her to turn her head and look at me, perhaps even to smile. But for all she knew, I might as well not have been there.

Then the physics master arrived, and we filed into class one after the other,... girl, boy, girl, boy. I tried to judge it so we'd be close as we squeezed through the door.

"Hi," I'd say.

"Hi."

"Can we talk later?"

"How about break time?"

"Yes - there's something I have tell you."

"I know. It's all right, I feel the same. Later then?"

"Later."

And then at break time, I'd find her sitting on the wall outside the girl's gym, toes together, head down and as I walked up to her, she'd lift her eyes, riveting me to the spot with a stare.

"I want to be with you," she'd say.

Wonderful! Except, of course, it didn't happen. I'm sure there were occasions when we did indeed brush by one another, but the words always died on my lips, and I'd feel the grief of them consuming me for the rest of the day. I recalled that grief now, felt it burning through and draining me of energy, of spirit. Its intensity startled me. How could the pain be real when the memory was so old?

Resurfacing with start into the present, I began to feel conspicuous, loitering outside of the school. A bloke in a collar and tie stands out these days and one has to be careful - there seem to be more bogeymen around than there were in the seventies, or at least we talk about them more,... daring to be more definitive, giving them names like drug-dealer and paedophile - and as I had already discovered, a man on his own with the wrong look about him had better watch out or he'll end up wearing the first tag anyone might care to toss his way.

Suddenly nervous, I locked my bike to the railings and walked into the school grounds, trying to convey the impression I knew what I was doing. The secretary's office was where it had always been, though there was a sophisticated security system now with cameras observing all the comings and goings. I'd barely crossed the threshold when the voice of a young woman arrested me.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm Tom," I said and I tried to smile, as if to say: "I'm harmless,"

but I fear it came out as more of a sneer. "I used to come here as a kid. I know it's probably not a good time,..."

She looked at me, sceptically. She was about twenty five and probably couldn't believe the school had even been built when I was a kid.

"If it's about a reunion, I could probably put you in touch with the right person."

"A reunion?"

"Most of the years have a reunion secretary."

"They do?"

"Of course. When did you leave?"

"Erm... '77."

"Ooh, I don't know. That *is* a long time ago. Wait there I'll have a look."

I did as I was told, sitting in the foyer while the nosy kids gawked at me.

"Sorry," said the secretary. "We only go back to 1980,..."

"I see. I don't suppose there's any chance of having a look around is there?"

"I'm sure Mr. Shaw would be glad to show you around," said the girl. "But you'll need to make an appointment. Can I have your telephone number?"

"Sure." I could already feel the momentum leaving me. I didn't see the point but I scribbled my number down anyway, and then I looked at her. "That wouldn't be John Shaw, would it? He used to be my geography teacher."

"I know he's been here a long time." She thought for a moment. "Tell you what, wait there. I'll have a word with him. He might be able to spare you a few minutes."

I recognised him straight away, though he must have been sixty. He didn't know me of course in spite of the fact he'd bollocked me regularly throughout his dubious tutorship. He smiled, shook my hand, then had me sit down while the secretary brought us tea. To my amazement, I discovered I still disliked him.

"I know you must be busy," I said. "I didn't want to take up your time. It's just that I've been thinking about the place a lot recently and I wondered what it would be like to walk down the corridors, maybe look inside a few of the classrooms."

"Ghosts, eh?" he said.

He surprised me. I'd always thought of him as an insensitive

bastard. "Ghosts,... yes, you might say that." After tea, and much quizzing about my year, he claimed to remember me, but I think he was just being polite.

"I can give you a ten minute tour, Tom." he said.

He'd never called me Tom before, always Thomas. Tom's too informal when you're yelling smart mouthed abuse at someone.

"That would be great," I replied.

From the outside, the school looked much the same - there's only so much you can do with architecture I suppose, but it was on the inside the passage of time had made its mark. For a start, it seemed brighter. I remembered drab walls, a sort of uniform eggshell blue, and it had been in need of a good scrub. Now it was all pastel shades, and the corridors, which had once rung out to the sound of footsteps and sliding bags, were now hushed by co-ordinating carpets. The classrooms were neater, brighter,... less formal with more carpets, and there were computers everywhere.

Incredibly, it all seemed much smaller, even though at fifteen I'd already reached my adult height of five feet nine. I gazed around, puzzled by the reduced scale. Were my other memories similarly distorted? Were those lovelorn moments, those feelings of despair, also exaggerated in my mind, blown up out of all proportion into a misleading caricature of the truth?

It was the metalwork lab that surprised me the most. It had gone: ripped out, along with the subject to be replaced by something called technology. Now, in all modesty, I thought I knew a thing or two about technology. Along with our car-mad metalwork master, we had rebuilt cars in this room - Mini Coopers and Mark one Escorts and we'd raced them at Oulton Park,... but so far as I could work out these days technology consisted of making things from cardboard and bent coat-hangers.

I picked up a curious contraption made of paper and flimsy wooden dowelling. It had been crudely painted in primary colours and resembled a sort of three dimensional Picasso. "What does this do, then?" I asked.

"Well," said Mr Shaw,... "It sort of flaps its wings." And then registering my surprise he went on defensively: "It's not so much the object that's important, Tom, as the way the children set about tackling the problem."

"Ah,..." I said, understanding not a word. "But there used to be machine tools in here. And in that room over there, there were

drawing boards, rows and rows of them - I got an O level in engineering drawing - that's what set me down the road to being a designer, I suppose."

Mr Shaw smiled patiently. "We stripped that lot out years ago," he said. "It didn't seem relevant any more. We're not in the business of raising factory fodder these days. No factories to send them to anyway, are there? Children deserve better than that. We see ourselves as being more in the business of turning out well rounded adults."

Is that what I'd been then I wondered? Factory fodder? But I was an engineer, a designer, a professional - I had the letters after my name to prove it! I know Derby's had used me up and were now preparing to spit me out, but they'd paid me for my trouble, paid for the mortgage on my nice house, paid for a newish car every four or five years,.... isn't that what it was all about: making an honest living?

We finished our tour back in the reception area, where I was left feeling like some sort of antique. By the age of sixteen, I'd learned the rudiments of cutting metal here and how to produce an engineering drawing to the stringent requirements of British Standards. I'd also stripped a Cosworth engine down to piece parts, rebuilt it and watched it being driven like crazy round a race track. But it was all irrelevant now. Like me, it seemed: irrelevant, brushed away by a bright new order, crushed beneath legions of brightly coloured flapping things.

"Well, thank you Mr Shaw. I'm glad I've seen it. It all looks very nice,... very neat,... very em,... stimulating."

Children were traipsing past, a long procession, hundreds and hundreds of them, heading from the assembly hall to their classes. Where would they go, I wondered, when they left, these well rounded adults? But Shaw was right. There were no factories, no places like Derby's any more to open their doors every September to swallow down the latest batch of fodder. Still, even well rounded adults needed jobs and they couldn't all work at the burger bar. Perhaps more of them stayed on at college than they had done in my days, but what then? They couldn't remain students for ever?

Could they?

"I'll be off," I said, still puzzled by it all, and then as an after thought I asked him: "I don't suppose you remember a girl called Rachel Standish do you? Same year as me. Dark haired,...."

He shrugged and glanced at his watch. "Sorry," he said.

"No. It was a long time ago."

Too much water had passed,... a torrent in fact, washing away all trace of Rachel and me. The world we had prepared ourselves for in those days had begun to change almost the moment we had walked out of the door. I wondered what she was doing now. Had she found something of more lasting relevance, or was she looking back, like me and wondering what the hell it had all been for?

I mounted the bike and cycled off slowly. There was a familiar heaviness in my heart, like I'd always felt after another day leaving this place without hearing her say those words. I didn't know if this was good or bad, because my more recent past had been characterised by a lack of any feeling at all. Even my divorce and the pending estrangement of my children seemed to have left me feeling nothing but a kind of sickly numbness. This pain was twenty five years old, but at least I felt it. It proved to me I was still capable of feeling something. I gathered the pain around me as I rode and I savoured it. Eleanor and Joni Mitchell were right, I thought: there is comfort in melancholy!

My father was painting the gatepost when I cycled up to him.

"How'd it go then?" he asked.

I was still trying to absorb what I'd seen. "It used to be about jobs," I said. "Now it seems to be about preparing well rounded adults for something or other. I'm not quite sure what."

"Would these be the same well rounded adults who daubed 'Donna is a twat' on these gateposts, then?" he asked.

I retired early that evening and lay in bed with the new sketchbook open on my lap, a freshly sharpened 2B pencil poised and I remained like that for a long while, contemplating the blank page, before daring to bring the pencil down and make a mark. It was just a line, a little wavy, like the string of an instrument that had been plucked. I tried another to see if anything suggested itself to me - a face, a flower, a voluptuous hillside - but there was nothing. I tried more lines but they seemed only to make the confusion worse, like a web tangling up my imagination. In the end I erased them, too ashamed to have anyone see them. Then I put the book back on the bedside table.

Instead, I lay twiddling the dial on my radio - tuning in to the static at about 208 metres, straining for the sound of Radio Luxembourg, for Bob Stewart and the Top Forty, even the

commercial jingles that had been so familiar back then, but there was nothing,... just impenetrable static where my youth had once been. It was impossible, I thought. You can never go back.

I looked over to Rachel's photograph. "I want to be with you," I said.

I didn't mean it,... not in the sense you're probably thinking. She'd be married now with kids. She'd be nothing like the person in the photograph, the person I remembered. It was more what she had come to mean, the last emotional signpost I'd passed on that long road before branching off into the amorphous fog of my adulthood - the road along which the poetry inside of me had died.

Of course, none of this was very productive. I'd landed myself in a mess and sooner or later I'd have to pick myself up and move on, except I no longer trusted myself to choose the right path any more. I had to make sense of the past twenty five years of my life, and it was impossible to do that without thinking of Rachel. Perhaps it went deeper still. Perhaps I would not be able to close with any of it until I *had* seen her. I would have to look into her eyes. I would have to ask her out, in that quaint old fashioned sense, regardless of her situation - ask her if she wanted to be with me. Only then, when she had looked at me in utter disbelief and I had felt the sting of her rejection, only then could I dismiss her, clear my mind of everything I knew, and move on into that far country which was all that remained of the rest of my life.

CHAPTER 10

It began as an idle notion, an exercise in thought, but gained momentum in my head until it seemed the most obvious thing to do,... to find her. It was not simply to ask her, for I felt ultimately I would perhaps still lack the courage, but more to put myself again within her orbit and to examine quite coldly any feelings she might still arouse. She was a ghost cut loose and needed laying to rest.

It made sense to start with Langholm Avenue. I'd told the policewoman I believed Rachel no longer lived there, but I hadn't known for sure. All I'd had to go on was the fact that most people move on. But then my father had lived in the same house since 1958, so I wondered if it might be possible Rachel's parents were still there in Langholm Avenue as well. It wasn't so reasonable to hope Rachel would be there too, but contacting her parents would be the first step in finding out where she'd gone. The problem was how to do that with discretion.

Rachel,

You won't remember me but we were at County High together and I was wondering if you'd be interested in attending a reunion for our year. I should add that I've not made any definite arrangements yet. I'm just testing to see how much interest there is and how many ex pupils from our year I can trace. If you're still in touch with anyone else who might be interested, I'd be grateful for any leads.

Please write to the above address or call me.

Regards

Thomas Norton.

Eleanor watched the letter creeping out of the printer. "You crafty beggar," she said.

"It seemed the best approach. The school secretary gave me the idea. Well, I can hardly tell Rachel I just want to look her in the eyes and hear her say she doesn't want to be my girlfriend, can I?"

"So you've made up your mind to trace her then? "

"Yes. I think you're right. She was the first really big thing ever to happen to me and it was just left hanging in the middle of nowhere. I need to finish it. I need to see her,... to see how much she's changed. Maybe the shock of that will bring me to my senses. "

"So you've no intentions of actually organising a reunion?"

"I wouldn't know where to start. Anyway, I'm not interested in

anyone else. Only her."

"Charming!"

"If her parents are still in Langholm Avenue, they'll pass it on, I guess,... then she'll write or call and say if she's interested."

"And after that?"

"I'll suggest we meet for lunch, or a drink or something. I'll see her and it'll be over."

"But what if she's not interested in a reunion?"

"I'll suggest we meet anyway. She can only say no. Maybe even that'll be enough to put an end to it all. I just need to,... make some sort of contact,... with that part of my past."

Perhaps it was menopausal, if such a thing can truly happen to a man. Since turning forty I had been expecting some form of madness to overtake me and this might have been it, a sort of panic at the passing of the years, a sense of going nowhere, a desperation to turn back the clock - to simply feel the way I had once felt. And how had I felt? Indeed what had I felt? It was impossible to say except it had all been much sharper, the edge to my emotions much keener than now. These days it seemed my brain was too muddled up to feel anything deeply, yet now the mere thought that I was writing something Rachel might soon be reading filled me with an incredible excitement. And it was this awakening that drove me, my mind craving more and more of the emotion that it seemed only Rachel could arouse.

It took two weeks for the letter to come back with "not known at this address" scribbled on the envelope. I was at once deflated. I tried to think of other ways to trace her, but girls have a habit of getting married and changing their names, so it's not simply a matter of trawling through the 'phone book for a list of possibilities. In the end, it was a mixture of luck and coincidence, that brought me one step closer.

I was on my way out to work one morning when the 'phone rang,

"Hi, this is Sonya."

"Sonya?"

"The secretary at County High?"

"Ah, yes,... Sonya."

"I thought you'd like to know, I was clearing out some cupboards here and I found an old letter. It was an invitation to a reunion. I remember you said you'd left in '77? Well this was your year - they

held it - oh - in 1987, obviously a ten-year thing. There was a contact number and a name, Carol Gent,.... have you a pencil handy?"

"Em,.... great. Thanks."

Carol Gent! I remembered Carol. She was one of the brightest and prettiest girls, very quiet with a wonderfully dignified manner. Years later I'd seen her working at the bank on Main Street. She'd served me a few times, but either she hadn't recognised me or she'd been too busy to make the time. I rang the number later from work only to have a crotchety old girl telling me there was no such person living there.

"Gent did you say?"

"That's right."

"Not lived here for years."

"Ah,... well, sorry to have bothered you."

But then, having remembered the bank, I decided to try there. It was a younger voice this time, the voice of the bank.

"Good morning, this is John speaking, how may I help?"

I almost couldn't answer. It had struck me that although the voice was human, his words sounded as if they'd been scripted by a machine. I didn't suppose for a minute a personal enquiry would be covered by his list of categories.

"Em... is Carol there, please?"

"This is First North West Bank. Do you have the right number, sir?"

"Yes, I believe so. I'm trying to trace Carol Gent,.... she works there, I believe."

"There's no one here by that name, sir." There was a pause and then, possibly suspecting he wasn't dealing with a customer, he came back with a less formal tone. "Do you mean Carol Conner?"

Thinking she may have married, I took a chance: "Conner,... of course. Could I speak to her please?"

"She's left."

"For lunch?"

"No, for good. She's not worked here for six months. Redundancy."

I was amazed. "Banks make people redundant too?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. Going myself at the end of the year. Can anyone else help?"

"Well, I was at school with Carol,... I'm trying to organise a

reunion. You wouldn't know anyone who's still in touch with her would you? Perhaps if I gave you my number,... someone could pass it on?"

There was another pause and I had the impression this time I was pushing my luck.

"Go on then," he said.

I had done all I could in the pursuit of my fantasy, and the only thing left was to wait. In the meantime, I returned to reality and the strangely serene atmosphere descending over the winding down of a company that had been in existence for the better part of a century.

There were twenty two of us in the design office at Derby's and I remember thinking that each of us must have had some therapeutic distraction because we were carrying on as if nothing had happened - except there seemed to be no haste, no urgency to anything any more. I continued to work on my valve, a last minute design change to a couple of enormous marine engines that now looked like being the last things Derby's ever built. I wanted to see the job through, see my contribution completed before I left. That was my distraction,... a stupid valve, and memories of Rachel.

In those days of winding down, I pitied Stavros. We lesser drones were expected to become down hearted and cynical, but the likes of Stavros had to rise above such petty emotion, to go on turning treadmill of middle-management with nothing but the prospect of dismissal at the end of it, like the rest of us. I took this to account for his somewhat weary expression that morning when he clapped me on the back half heartedly in passing.

"Hi, Tom. Sorry to hear about your trouble. "

"Trouble?"

"Annie,... and all that. "

"Oh,... sure. Don't worry. It's been coming for a while. "

"If there's anything I can do, you know where I am, mate."

Mate? We had always got on, but at a distance. Suddenly though, it seemed we were mates.

"Thanks, Stav. Why are you dressed so smart anyway?"

He brightened a little and did a mock twirl, showing off his new three piece suit to a sudden chorus of whistles and jeers. "I'm on escort duty," he said.

"The Swedes?"

"They're witnessing the acceptance trials on the MV30's this

afternoon. You'd better join me, just in case they've any questions about the changes to that bloody valve of yours."

"Okay. I'd better 'phone Eleanor and tell her I'll be late. "

"Eleanor, eh? You're a bit of a dark horse, Tom Norton! "

"Don't look at me like that. Eleanor's my step mother. "

It was, a time of strangeness in which curious alliances were formed, and people one normally steered clear of suddenly appeared in a new light. Stavros was an example,... Fred Arbuckle was another - a bluntly spoken, pipe smoking detail-draughtsman with forty years of service, a man who had become painfully obsolete since they'd chucked his drawing board away and replaced it with a computer workstation. He'd been eavesdropping on my conversation with Stavros, hovering in the background as if he had something to say to me that would have to wait until Stavros was out of range. I caught him looking over my shoulder around mid-morning.

"What's up then Tommy?" he said.

"Not much, Fred."

"On lifeboat duty for old brown nose are you?"

"Stavros? Oh, he's all right - there's no harm in him."

"Suppose not - or he'd have made it to the boardroom years ago. "

"So what can I do for you, Fred? "

"Well, me and a couple of lads are planning a raid at dinner time - you with us?"

"A raid?"

"Sneakin in 't shed."

The shed was a vast factory complex across the road from the office. It had served as Derby's centre for production since 1910, but had lain empty since the early nineties and was now fenced off.

"What do you want to go in there for?" I asked.

"One last look around. A bit of nostalgia, like."

"Gets you nowhere, nostalgia," I replied. "Nostalgia is useless."

He shrugged as if to say it was okay, that it didn't matter, but I had the feeling he'd been relying on me and I'd let him down. And anyway, who was I to talk, dredging up the past as I'd been doing? "Go on then. Give me a nudge when you're ready."

Fred was in his sixties now. He'd walked to Derby's every day since he was sixteen, a journey of a couple of miles, rain or shine. So far as anyone could work out he'd never had a day off sick and

never had a holiday longer than a week at a time. The routine of Derby's was the backbone of his life and a few jokers in the office reckoned he'd be dead within six months of the place closing.

It was in walking past the shed he'd spotted a gap in the mesh fence where he told me a bloke could probably wriggle though without too much indignity. It was also off the main road and out of sight of the security cameras. At the appointed hour, I followed him through this gap. There was no one else. They'd all chickened out, he said, though I suspect now he hadn't actually asked anyone else. The main entrance was securely boarded, but we both remembered a door around the back which led onto the machine shop via a dingy cellar. It was locked but, with alarming expertise, Fred drew a crowbar out from under his overcoat and had it open in a few seconds.

There was light enough to see inside, though the windows were grimed and hung with cobwebs. There were workbenches and papers scattered everywhere, but amid the chaos of dereliction there lay curious islands of order. By the wall, a kettle was plugged into a socket, and a little ring of expectant mugs all sat there, having waited all these years for someone brew up.

Fred seemed not to notice the poetry of it and we pressed on, groping in the half light until we came out onto the machine shop. It was empty, all the decent machines having been shipped out and sold, the knackered ones dragged off screaming to the scrap man. All that remained now was a vast, echoing cavern of a place. Fred seemed to be looking for something, some specific location as he padded intensely around the oil stained floor.

"Here," he said and then he handed me a camera. "Take us me picture will 't"

"Eh?"

"Right here,.... I worked on a turret lathe on this spot for twenty years. It was the first job I had when I came out of my time."

I looked around. Part of the roof had caved in and the place seemed hollow and cold. It felt like we were standing in the remains of a dinosaur, but Fred was seeing something else, feeling something else,... the noise, the sense of something going on, a powerhouse, hot machines, hot metal. I remembered it too. It had been ugly and dirty, and a frightening place too for a teenager, but also I could not deny I 'd also felt a tremendous sense of involvement in something big, something important.

I took his picture while he posed - a heroic pose, I thought, one foot up on a bucket like he'd just shot a lion. Then I laughed. "Fred in his shed, eh?"

On the way out I asked him for the camera again and I took a picture of the kettle with its cups. I expected some manly abuse, but he just waited.

"Things move on, eh Tommy?"

Did they, I wondered? Was it a process of moving on, or merely one of falling apart, like in nature, a process of flowering followed by inevitable decay? I looked at him and I realised he was afraid.

We build a shell around us as we grow, the older we are the thicker the shell but deep inside, we're all the same, all of us still children blinking wide eyed at the world and wanting someone to take us by the hand, someone who will show us the way and tell us what the hell it's all about.

"You'll be all right with your payout, Fred. Forty years! You'll be a millionaire. I've another twenty five to work somewhere."

He laughed. "That's right," he said. "A fuckin' millionaire." But his voice rang strangely hollow.

We're rarely aware of living through a change - only later, when we look back. But suddenly then, I glimpsed the enormity of the change sweeping the likes of me and Fred along, a great tidal wave. Me? I had a chance, I'd find something once I got my mind around whatever was haunting me, but Fred? At sixty you might say it shouldn't have made much difference to him, that he was overdue a rest and retirement to his cabbage patch anyway. But not all the Freds have cabbage patches. They have routines. They have walks to work, and the company of other men.

Not many years ago, there had been a fuss about some old geezer who'd worked in the grim, half lit world of Derby's tooling stores. He'd lied about his age so he could go on working. He was seventy five before they'd found him out. Was it just the money, I'd wondered? Was it a fear of poverty, a lack of pension provision? Or had it been more to do with an overriding desire to belong somewhere?

The MV30 trials took longer than planned, as these things generally do. It was a noisy business - each engine, the size of a transit van roaring full throttle, straining against a flywheel. It was boy's own stuff,... banks of digital meters and switches, and a half a dozen computers to bear witness, to print out their columns of

Newton-meters and Dynes, and Joules, to present their analysis in the form of neatly coloured graphs.

Stavros was sweating beneath his lab-coat and ear-defenders, great beads running down his forehead. The Swedish engineers pored over their data and pretended not to notice. I gave him a handkerchief and, yanking off one cup of his defenders, I put my mouth to his ear and suggested he went and took his jacket and waistcoat off. "It's boiling in here, Stav! "

"Right, Tom. Right. " And then: "Do you think they noticed?" he said afterwards. "Do you think they were suspicious - I mean it looked like I was guilty over something and hoping they wouldn't find me out."

"Don't worry," I told him. "Those engines are the best Derby's have ever made, and they know it."

"They are?"

"Sure," I said and I smiled because he really had no idea, nor did he care, just so long as the acceptance was signed and the engines were delivered to the shipyard on time. Nor did anyone care really, or so it seemed to me. Derby's had accumulated a century of knowledge, a knowledge passed on and improved from generation to generation, a continuity that was about to be written off as irrelevant in our more enlightened age, an age where they teach our children that it is no longer the nature of the problem that should concern us, but more the way we organise ourselves and, the efficiency with which we interact in solving it.

I was in a pensive mood when I finally escaped the factory and drove the couple of miles across town, from Derby's to Arkwright Street. The Midget was running sweetly, though it seemed to be burning an absurd amount of oil. I had the top down, taking my time, letting the wind massage its way into my head.

A couple of lads tore past me on the A6. They were driving a knackered old Nova hatchback, blaring out a chest-punching bass from a stereo system that was probably worth more than the car. They looked about fourteen, the pair of them wearing reversed baseball hats. The passenger mouthed something unintelligible at me, but I guessed they were trying to goad me into a race.

Perhaps I could have kept up with them, but I was afraid of bursting the engine in the process so I gave them a smile, slowed down and let them go. The road ahead belonged to them, even though it seemed to me as if they'd already taken one look at it and

said to themselves: "Fuck that!"

Me? I was more like one of those cups sitting around the kettle, waiting for a brew all these years, not knowing the lights had gone, the power had gone and the whole place was falling down around my ears.

Eleanor was waiting when I walked in. She sensed something of my mood and hugged me. It was a spontaneous gesture and I clung to her for a while longer than was perhaps necessary. No one else could do that for me. No one else could get that close so easily. Thank God for her, I thought.

"Carol 'phoned," she said.

I was puzzled, thinking I should have known the name from somewhere. "Carol?"

"Carol Conner. The reunion secretary, remember?"

"Oh,... that Carol. She 'phoned?"

"Yes. She sounded nice."

"She did?"

"I told her you'd be around at seven."

"What?"

"Did I do wrong? I thought you were serious about this business with Rachel."

"Did you tell her about that?"

"No, of course not. That's our secret. I said you were interested in organising a reunion, that's all. What's wrong?"

"I don't know, perhaps it's best just to leave it."

"What harm can it do? And you need to get out more. Go and have a shower while I make some tea."

I was afraid. For weeks now, I'd been probing the past, trying to tease out the emotions and the passions of my youth from the safety of the here and now. But suddenly it was as if a door had opened and the past had beckoned me inside.

CHAPTER 11

I arrived half an hour late. The Midget had cut out on the way and it had taken me ages to figure out it was a broken throttle link. I'd fixed it at the side of the road with a bit of fuse wire and turned up with my hands full of oily grime. When she opened the door she took my breath away. At first she seemed exactly the same, at least inside my head, and it took a moment to register the years she now carried in the wrinkles around her eyes and in the little strands of grey twisted into her great bush of auburn hair.

"Is it Tom?"

"Yes. Hi,... sorry I'm late. I broke down."

She was dressed up,... a short, strappy dress and dark stockings. There was perfume, too, something fresh and lemony - it made me anxious. "I'm sorry," I said. "You're on your way out somewhere?"

"No. Come in." She saw my hands. "Bathroom's just through there."

It was a decent flat, one in a block of four on a new development on the eastern outskirts of town. It had been the site of the Workhouse, which had survived as a mental hospital until about five years before. My father had spent a year in its antiseptic and oppressive wards, before being moved to a brighter, lighter place in the suburbs of Preston.

This was prime land, on a little rise overlooking the West Pennines. When they'd demolished the hospital I'd thought there'd be some posh houses going up to take advantage of the view, but they'd filled it with little brick boxes, all overlooking one another, as if starter homes were not allowed to have a view in case it made them too expensive.

It didn't take me long to figure out Carol was living alone even though she was wearing a ring. It was the bathroom - the bottles. They were all soft colours, feminine concoctions,... no manly toiletries, and only one toothbrush.

"Tea?"

"Great. Look, I can come back some other time if it's not convenient."

"It's okay. I'd no plans."

She invited me to sit down while she made tea and as I waited it began to dawn that she might have dressed up for me. Perhaps it

was a sad indication of the level of my self-worth that I should have been so astonished anyone should take the trouble. One seems to reach a point in life when people take you for granted and vice versa. There are no surprises any more. Perhaps that was another item I could add to the long list of reasons for why Annie had chosen to brighten up her life with the wide arsed Alistair.

Yes, I'd taken her for granted - I could see that now - rarely thinking to impress her, to show her how much I still cared, nor even to ask her how she was feeling, and likewise she had seemed to lose interest in me. Since the children had come along it had been all we could manage to simply cope with them and we'd each taken it on trust that the other was all right.

"Your mother said you were interested in a reunion."

"My mother? Oh, yes. Eleanor. She's my step mother, actually. Sure, it was just an idea. I went to the school and that's how I got your name. Then I remembered seeing you at the bank."

"At the bank?"

"You served me once or twice."

"Did I? I don't remember. Did we ever speak?"

"Well, you always seemed so busy."

She settled down, opposite. "I organised a reunion years ago," she said. "But there wasn't much interest to be honest. I'd imagined holding it in the school hall, but in the end there were only a handful of us and we sat around a couple of tables at the King's Head."

I didn't remember getting an invitation, but then I'd never really belonged to Carol's clique, nor their friends, nor their cliques. It wasn't that I would have gone anyway - in the eighties I'd seemed always to be too busy to indulge myself with matters of the past - unlike now when the past seemed about the only thing that existed.

She leaned over and picked up a photograph from the coffee table. It was an accident, but I was left in no doubt that she wasn't wearing a bra and for the first time in years, I felt the warm flush of sexual arousal. It was an exquisite sensation, more perhaps than just sex - a hint of lust, a feeling of absolute naughtiness that a stagnating marriage had led me to believe I'd outgrown. It was very pleasing to discover I had not.

For one crazy moment, I imagined Carol lying on the carpet. I felt my hand running up her thigh beneath her frock while she plunged her hand into my pocket and squeezed me in places that

hadn't been squeezed in decades.

"You haven't changed," she said.

"I'm sorry?"

She was looking at the picture. It was a copy of the same form photograph I had at home. She was lying, being nice. I'd changed beyond recognition.

"I'd a bit more hair in those days."

"Oh but I remember you, Tom Norton. My friend had a terrible crush on you."

"What?" I tried to think who'd she'd hung out with in those days. Could it have been Rachel? But so far as I remembered, Rachel had belonged to a different clique, a slightly less regal stratum of school society, as indeed I had.

"I'm not telling you who," she said. "She'd kill me."

I laughed. Then I wondered if this person was still haunted by memories of me, Tom Norton who didn't know she existed.

"If you see her," I said, "tell her I'm sorry. I know that sort of thing can hurt. A mate of mine had a crush on a girl too. Remember Rachel Standish? He really had it bad for her - and she never knew."

Carol thought for a while, her finger running lightly over the faces in the photograph. "Ah, Rachel." She pulled a face. "I didn't really like her much."

I was hurt. "How come?"

"I thought she was a bit of a,... well, a bit of a tart to be honest."

I felt hot. "Oh? She always seemed quite a nice girl,... from what I can remember. "

"Well, she slept with two boys that I know of in our last year."

The floor swayed and a bead of sweat broke out on my forehead. "Never,... who?"

"Didn't you go on that skiing trip to France?"

"No."

Carol was amused by the memory. "I was twenty three before I first had sex," she said. "Rachel Standish! Ooh, she was a one all right. I wonder what she's doing now? The last time I saw her must have been the year after we'd left school. She was working at Freshways Supermarket in Leyland,... married John Ogilvy,... remember him? Nice lad, John, though I always said he could have done better. I quite fancied him myself. He made it to Cambridge, you know? He was the only one in our year who did. I think he got a job down there and they both moved away."

I was taking it all in, storing up the information for later: Ogilvy, Cambridge, but I was aware of staring blankly at Carol in a sort of dazed silence. Rachel had always seemed pure and heavenly to me. In all my memories of her, not once had I wondered what it would be like to run my hand up her thigh or to peel open her blouse. Strange as it might seem, that had not been part of the fantasy at all and the reason was simple: I hadn't really known what sex was. I'd been no more than a boy. But Rachel? This revelation shocked me to the core and I had to take a deep breath before I could ease the tremor in my voice.

"John Ogilvy?"

"Yes. I wonder if they're still together? Anyway what about you? What are you up to these days? You married?"

"Sort of," I said. "We're not together now. Split recently. And you?"

"Same," she said. "Do you work?"

"Engineer. I work at Derby's on Bridgeman street." I tried to sound chatty, but I could feel myself drying up.

"I heard it was shutting down," she said.

"That's right - restructuring."

"Ah,... restructuring. I've been restructured as well, you know?"

"I heard."

"I was an area supervisor - went around half a dozen branches in the district - but there's only a few branches left these days. They didn't need me any more."

"Redundancy?"

"Well, down-sizing they call it, don't they? Good name that. It sums up how it makes you feel. Cut down to size, reduced in stature and spirit. Sure, they down-sized me all right."

"What will you do?"

"Not sure yet, but I'll have to find something soon, if only to pay the mortgage on the flat. They were advertising at Freshways, working on the tills in fact - Christmas coming up and everything. There doesn't seem to be much else going for a woman in her forties."

I realised then that Carol was still hurting, perhaps fishing for sympathy, for company. "You're bound to find something," I said.

"I know. I just imagined working for the bank for ever. I really liked it, you know. And you? What will you do?"

"I haven't thought about it much. There was talk of some of us

being offered jobs in France. We merged with a French company some years ago, so in theory we've got factories over there that are part of the same group. They'll most likely be taking on what bit of work we've got left, and I suppose they'd like some engineers who know the job to move with it."

"That's great."

"Well,... I don't know. Maybe I've got a bad attitude or something. I enjoy what I do, but I only ever wanted to work so I could live, you know? I want to go home every night and do whatever I want to do - browse the Internet, tinker with the car, read books, visit friends,..." I had been about to add that playing with the children was high among those pastimes, but I dared not hope I'd ever do that again. "But now," I went on. "Everyone seems to expect you to live to work - fourteen hour days and weekends too. I'm not saying it would be like that in France, but I'd still feel I was on the job all the time, away from home, away from where I wanted to be."

"Unless you made your home there."

She had a point. My horizons hadn't expanded much beyond the small northern town I'd been born in. They'd never needed to before. Home to me had always been an executive brick-box at Parbold with Annie and the kids. I'd driven the ten miles into Middleton every day, then home. It had been simple, familiar. But Paris didn't sound like me at all,... didn't sound so,... simple.

Carol seemed a pleasant, bubbly sort of woman and we were getting on well. I took a deep breath. "Look. I don't want you to get the wrong idea or anything, but can I take you out for some supper?"

I'm not sure why I asked and after I'd said it, it struck me as a reckless thing to have done, not being separated even for a month yet.

"All right," she said.

We went in her car. I didn't trust mine until I could make a better job of fixing the throttle linkage. She drove a bright little Fiat and she handled it with such careless abandon, I had to grip the edge of my seat.

"Where do you fancy then?" she asked.

"I don't know. The Blue Parrot used to be okay."

She laughed. "Where've you been? They pulled that down years ago - there's a car showroom there now."

"There is? What about the Loose Goose, then?"

"Loose Goose? Tom really!"

"They've pulled that down too?"

"No, it's called the Virgo now."

"Any good?"

"Well, it's,... it's where ladies of a certain persuasion hang out. You'd look a bit daft in there."

"You're right," I said, still not having caught on. "Full of teenagers is it?"

She shook her head. "You don't get out much do you?"

We had a tour of the town, passing the old places where we'd each gone as youngsters to show to the world how grown up we were. I had not seen Middleton at night for decades. Living at Parbold, I'd been drawn to other towns for shopping and entertainment. Names had changed and some of the old haunts, the clubs and pubs, had gone to be replaced by cheap offices and dingy drop-in centres. Also the faces hanging around the doors seemed to be always so very young.

"They're just children!" I said.

"Feeling it are you?"

I smiled. "Sorry. I know it's a cliché, but inside I don't feel any older than I did at sixteen."

"But everything's more intense at that age isn't it? " she said. "Life dulls you down a bit. It's meant to be that way."

"You think so?"

"Sure. At sixteen, the right boy only has to look at a girl and she can't eat for a week - the right boy, mind. So imagine having to cope with marriage and kids and divorce,.... at sixteen?"

"You mean we couldn't cope?"

"I don't think we could handle the emotion. We'd explode,..."

I remembered the intensity of which she spoke, going home of an evening and lying down on my bed after another day of not hearing Rachel say she wanted to be with me, feeling too sad, too sorry for myself to cope with anything.

Suddenly Carol turned up the radio. "Remember this?" she said. It was ABBA: belting out Dancing Queen. "I remember going to the school disco and dancing to this. We'd never heard anything like it before."

I listened to the words, the sounds, the soaring mood of the music. It seemed to open a vein and the memories flooded out. It

was the very peak of my affair with Rachel. "Nineteen seventy six," I said. "There was another, later on that year: Fernando. I remember tuning in to radio Luxembourg and hearing it for the first time drifting in through the static. Scary isn't it?"

"Scary?"

"Nostalgia,... that sudden surge of feeling, the memory, the sense of an atmosphere so fresh you could almost touch it,... except it was twenty five years ago and gone for ever."

"You've got it bad. I don't think this reunion thing's such a good idea. You need to cut loose. Go to France. Put it all behind you - reinvent yourself. Find yourself a nice French girl."

"You're right. It was a bad idea."

And besides I already had what I'd come for, another lead, another signpost along the way back to Rachel and the source of all this glorious emotion.

We'd left the town by now and found the dark country lanes which ran up into the West Pennines.

"I used to go snogging up here," I said, by now completely unguarded with her.

"Back seat of a Cortina eh?"

"Front mostly. I never had the nerve to suggest the back."

"Tom, you old romantic."

We found a restaurant. It was quiet but at least the clientele were of a similar age to ourselves. So we settled in and ate French food, drank half a bottle of potent red wine and listened to Mozart being murdered by some po-faced geezer on a cello.

"So, you really don't fancy going to France, then?"

"I'm not sure. I've been over a couple of times - the office is on the outskirts of Paris. It's okay, but it's still a city and as you've probably figured out by now I'm barely street wise enough to survive in Preston, let alone Paris."

"Well, I'd love to go," she said. "Parlez vous, Francais?"

"Un Peu," I said. "Tres Peu."

She giggled. "Spoken like a native. You'd be right at home."

After we'd eaten, she pushed the cork back into the half empty bottle. "This stuff's lethal. We'd better have the rest at the flat."

So that was where I finished the evening, drunk on wine and memories of my early teens and with ABBA Gold playing loud on her stereo. Neither of us were particularly used to copious quantities of red wine and it had loosened us up in a dangerously

delightful way. We sat side by side on the sofa, close, but without actually touching while we gulped down the remains of the bottle, plus another she'd been keeping to one side for 'a special occasion'.

She'd been married for twenty years. There were no children because her husband hadn't wanted any.

"I don't blame him," I joked, then regretted it because it didn't raise much of a laugh and I began to get an idea of the tension overshadowing her marriage. A successful marriage, they say, is based on compromise, but that's nonsense because there are certain fundamental issues you simply can't compromise on, and children are one of them.

"Too late for me now," she said. "And would you believe it - he ran off with a young girl from the beauty counter at Boots and the next thing you know she's pregnant!"

"You're joking!"

"Seriously! Ooh,... Tom! I can't feel my legs."

"Me neither."

"You can't possibly drive home,..."

Now, I know what you're thinking, and I agree, it would have been very easy to fall into bed with Carol that evening. She was warm and welcoming, perhaps a little lonely and the wine had lowered both our defences, but I still felt married. Savouring the scent of a good looking woman was one thing, having sex with her was, for me at that time, quite another.

"I'll tell you what," I said after she'd brought me a couple of pillows and her spare duvet.

"What's that then?"

"If I get the job in Paris, we'll do the town over there and you can sleep on my sofa."

"You're drunk. Night-night."

"See you."

I slept a little, but the sofa was too short and the duvet seemed to wrap me in her scent all night. I was up at six thirty and tapping on her bedroom door.

"Tom?"

"Brought you coffee? Sorry if I woke you."

"You didn't. God my head!"

"I know. Me too."

"You're dressed! What time is it?"

"Early. I've to be at work by eight and I need to call home first

and change my shirt."

"And here I was thinking you wanted to snuggle in here with me."

"Don't tempt me."

Was that a come on, I wondered? It was a long time since I'd played this game, a long time since I'd snuggled up against a woman - I mean just curled into her heat and drifted off. Annie hadn't been able to tolerate anyone encroaching on her body space for long - even in bed, except for the brief moments of our marital relations, as she'd called them.

So why, just sitting there, did I feel so guilty? Why, by just looking at this woman's sweet face, did I feel I was letting people down? If not Annie, then my children. My children! They'd be waking now, filling the house with life - too soon, always too soon, and how I missed it now.

"Carol?"

"Oh,..." she moaned.

"What is it?"

"You were going to lie and say you'll call me."

"No."

"No?"

"I was going to say, I came here last night, not really knowing what I was doing. I was trying to connect with something in the past, something I didn't really expect to be there any more - I didn't think for a minute I'd have fun as well."

"It was fun, wasn't it. You're a nice bloke, Tom."

Nice bloke? Story of my life. "Thanks,... you're quite nice yourself."

"Does that mean we're on for Paris, then?"

"Paris? Oh, sure. But that may not happen and anyway it could be a year and I was hoping,... well I'm not sure what I was hoping."

She laughed and shook her head. Then she punched me in the arm and told me to get out. "But call me," she said.

Outside, the air was cold and the sky was clear. I fired up the Midget and sat there a while. For all its years, its aged quirks and my father's derision, I liked the feel of it. In a sense it was nostalgia, like last night, filling my head with the sights and the sounds and the smells of the past, all of these things acting like triggers, releasing the thoughts and the feelings of an earlier me. None of this was futile, for sometimes, only by courting the past can we

measure and understand where we are now. I think that was the essence of what I was trying to do.

I glanced up at the window of her flat and was glad because she was there, looking down, her magnificent bush of hair wild and ruffled. Her face seemed sad though, a little anxious, her own reality perhaps settling back upon her, but then she brightened when she saw me looking,... and she waved.

I had gone looking for a way back into the past and found it, a tenuous lead, but enough to work with. I'd also come away having had a glimpse into the future. The pleasing sight of Carol's carelessly unguarded bosom had been enough to assure me there was little chance of my becoming a hermit, so somewhere along the way there would be another night like last night, there would be soft lights, there would be wine,.... and a kiss.

But how much time would we have? How long before that warm duvet turned cold and I came home to find an Alistair sitting on her sofa? It was irrational of course - my mind racing on, for there was nothing to suggest any of this would ever happen, and yet it troubled me. If I was lucky, I might have one last chance at happiness with someone, but I could not see myself ever being in love. Throughout my entire life, and my one shot at marriage, it seemed I had only ever loved one person.

And that was Rachel.

CHAPTER 12

It's funny the rubbish one keeps. It was tradition for the local paper to publish the examination results from every school in the district. I kept mine. I found it in my little box of treasures, along with my Sunday School certificates and my cycling proficiency badge.

I read through it now, a litany of names - five years of preparation for the wide world and a mark of achievement, of readiness for our places within it. Rachel had scored well. Eight 'O' levels and a string of CSE's. Maths, Physics, Geography, Biology, French, German,....

John Ogilvy was there too. I remembered him now, a deeply serious lad who'd floated around in the upper clique of middle-class children. He'd scored fourteen 'O' levels, all top grades - the highest achiever by far, and I remember him leaving for college,... for A levels.

So, he'd made it to Cambridge. Not many did in those days, not from among the shaggy haired ranks of a provincial comprehensive, anyway. But his academic prowess impressed me less than the fact that he'd married Rachel. Was it possible, I wondered, he might have loved her as much as I?

Unlike Rachel, John Ogilvy wasn't difficult to trace. I did it the next evening in half an hour, using my Dad's PC and a program I'd taken off the cover of a magazine. A CD ROM remains to me a thing of wonder, but that's because I remember having to store computer data on a cassette tape - it might have taken twenty minutes to load the simplest of games into my Sinclair Spectrum. By contrast, in a matter of seconds, the CD ROM could give me the name and address of anyone registered to vote in the whole of the United Kingdom. I could search by county, by town and by village and in the time it took Eleanor to make coffee and to plonk it down at my elbow, I'd found him.

"He's in Lipton. Marsh Farm, Ely road."

"And Rachel?"

"I don't know. The only other person at that address is a P. Ogilvy."

Eleanor sighed. "Perhaps they're not together any more. It's a long time ago. He could have remarried. Pauline,... I bet it's a Pauline."

I picked up the 'phone and dialled the number listed against the address. "Hi. Is that John? John, this is Tom Norton. I think we were at school together,... County High,... Tom Norton,... Well, it's a long time ago,.... John,.... I know this is a bit sudden but I'm in Cambridge on business next week and I was wondering if you'd fancy meeting up for a drink. I'm trying to catch up on a lot of the old faces from back then,... I'm,... thinking of,.... erm,.... writing a book,.... Where? The Dog and Gun? How about next Wednesday - seven thirty? Right, see you then. Bye."

Eleanor wasn't entirely impressed. "Where did you learn to lie like that?"

"There's no harm," I said. "Who's to say I'm not thinking about writing a book."

"It's about as likely as you organising a reunion. Did he remember you?"

"He remembered County High. But no, he hadn't a clue who I was. Said he was in this pub, the Dog and Gun most nights, that I'd most likely find him there."

It's a long run to Cambridgeshire from the North West, too far for an old Midget with an engine past its best, so I rang Phil and arranged to use his workshop over the weekend. I didn't have time to strip the engine and re-bore it any more, so I ordered a re-con over the Internet. It arrived in a crate, the following Saturday, moments before I turned up myself.

It was a quiet place, an old farm up on the moors, nestling in a fold of shaggy brown hills. There was still the rusting agricultural clutter lying about, stuff that hadn't been used in ages and the whole place had the look of failure in its decrepitude. It was sheep that had kept places like this going, a precarious business at the best of times, but then the foot and mouth had finished it off and they'd found the previous owner lying in a ditch with his brains blown out.

I found Phil round the back of the barn unloading boxes from his van into the back of another van whose seriously scruffy owner eyed me suspiciously.

"It's all right," Phil told him. "He's a mate. Gizza lift here will you, Tom?"

Naive to a fault, as Eleanor would say, I rolled up my sleeves and joined in, only to realise some time later I was shifting boxes of cigarettes Her Majesty's Customs hadn't had the pleasure of seeing

first. When we'd done, the man pulled out the thickest wad of twenties I've ever seen and he counted two thousand pounds into Phil's hand. Then he stuck a twenty into mine for my trouble. I was about to protest but Phil shot me a look and I realised it was probably safer just to accept.

I remembered then, Eleanor's warning about not getting too close to Phil. Now I knew what she meant. Phil had helped me out more than once and I'd have to be wary about any favours he asked for in return. He'd stood where I was standing and he'd made a choice about the best way forward for his life. He'd stepped squarely into the black economy, which for all its risks, had the one advantage of being far more tangible than fishing in the shifting depths of your own past. I understood the significance of the farm for him then, for at first it had seemed a strange choice of abode, but of course it was remote and the chances of being surprised by HMG up there was far less than in town.

"Right," he said. "What about this engine then?"

It would have been easy for me to judge Phil and in truth I did not approve of his dishonesty. I saw no distinction between thieving from the government and thieving from a bank, but aside from all that, Phil and I had been programmed by the same code, and one not so easily explained to an outsider. We were engineers. He might have been Russian, and I might have been Greek, a world and a language apart but when it came to engineering, we understood each other perfectly.

His workshop was spacious and well ordered. There were bits of motorbikes laid out on benches - Ducattis, Moto-Guzzis, modern racers and some classics, all stripped down, the parts squared up neatly, the nuts and bolts like little soldiers on parade. Motorbikes, marine diesels or Boeing 747's,.... different products but the same code.

It was twenty years since I'd last had the engine out of a car, but the MG was fairly simple in concept, it's design probably not much more advanced than something you'd have found in the nineteen forties. Between us, we managed it, methodically stripping out the leads and the hoses. Then, slowly, we winched the engine clear.

"I thought you would have been a whiz on engines," he joked. "Working at Derby's."

"The engines I'm used to are a bit bigger than this," I said.

We muddled through, poring over the pages of my Haynes

manual and we had the new one in and running by mid-afternoon.

"Bloody hell," said Phil. "Would you listen to that?"

"Sweet, isn't it?"

Shortly after we'd finished, Eleanor and my father arrived to see how things were going. Phil had a stethoscope on the carburettors, and was balancing them up by the tone of the hiss as they sucked in air. "Sounds even better now," he said. "Like a Swiss watch."

My father smirked. "Shame about the rest of it."

"It'll be like new when I've finished."

It would do for now, I thought,... the gearbox was a bit noisy and I guessed that would be the next job, but it would probably get me to Cambridgeshire without having to call out the AA.

They stood there for a while chatting, Phil and Eleanor and my father, while I tinkered with the remaining nuts and bolts and wiped the oily hand prints from off the bonnet. Eleanor knew what I was up to and if she did, then my father did and maybe even Phil as well, but they didn't question it. No one told me I was a fool.

Eventually Dad and Phil sloped off for a brew, leaving me with the ethereal Eleanor. She looked out of place amongst all the hard and oily mechanical odds and ends, like a pale flower that might suddenly wilt.

"All set then?" she asked. "When will you go?"

"Wednesday," I told her. "I'll be back late on Thursday, all being well."

"Make sure you ring - let us know you're okay."

"Oh, Dad won't bother."

"But I will. Ring me, Tom. Promise."

"Okay. Look, I've got to test drive this now. Fancy a spin?"

She brightened at once. "Can we have the top down?"

Sure, I was all set - a new engine, a new stepping stone on my way back into the past. But on the eve of my departure, after packing my bag and measuring the long red line of the A1 on my map, I suffered an attack of nerves. I'd been down that road a few times, all the way to London, in more luxurious cars, the sort of cars that can cruise at eighty and make it feel like you're floating. It wouldn't be like that in the Midget.

Then there was a commotion downstairs, the doorbell ringing, muffled voices, and after a while my father walked in with Stephen hanging around his neck.

"Visitors," he said.

"Daddy!"

"Eh?.... Stevie! What the hell?"

I came downstairs to find Annie, giving Eleanor the cold eye. Gemmie was sitting quietly by the fire holding her teddy. There was a suitcase by the door. Annie seemed almost pleased to see me. "I need you to look after the kids for a few days. Something's come up."

"What about your Mum and Dad?"

"They're busy."

"But I've got, em,... work,... And what about Gemmie's school?"

"You know where it is. You can take her,... it's only until Friday. You'll have to get some time off."

But I'd already booked the last of my holidays. I was using them on a two day trip to Cambridgeshire. "It's,... a bit short notice," I said.

Then my Dad chipped in. "What he means is yes."

"No I don't."

Eleanor pinched my arm and then I saw Gemmie's expression. She looked lost and on the verge of tears.

"What I mean is it's all right. It's fine," I said. Then I picked Gemmie up and had to swallow back the tears myself as she melted into me.

We had loved each other, once, Annie and me, and Gemmie had grown up hearing us exchanging gentler words - words like: "Fancy a brew, sweetheart?" and "Gizza cuddle, lover!" Now her parents were facing each other from a distance, with their arms folded. Could everything we'd had really have been as fragile as all that? Was there nothing we could salvage? I looked at Annie for a sign, but she was already a stranger: she was Alistair's woman, now.

"We'll have some fun, eh, Gemmie?" I said.

Eleanor walked Annie out to the car and she told me later that Annie had driven away in tears.

"I don't get it," I said.

She shrugged. "Perhaps Alistair finds they cramp his style." She was looking at the children, not smiling, but biting her lip, her eyes darting nervously from one to the other. She'd always seemed pleased to be with them before, but then they'd never stayed over, never slept in the house and had time to wreck it with their noise and their chaos and their perpetually sticky hands.

"I'm sorry," I said. "This isn't right."

She forced a smile. "Don't worry."

But I did worry. Eleanor had been a source of so much strength these past weeks, I'd forgotten how fragile she'd once been herself. We settled them into my room, though Gemmie was cross at the prospect of sharing a bed with her little brother. "He smells," she said.

"Do you smell, Stevie?" asked Eleanor.

"No. Gemmie smells."

Eleanor called silence with a witch-like wave of her arms. "Last one in bed really smells."

They'd brought hardly anything with them, just some clothes and what toys they'd managed to clutch as they were being swept out of the house. I didn't know what was going on and nor did I believe Annie's parents hadn't been able to take the children. They would have dropped everything if they'd thought the kids were going to be dumped over here - Alan had never seen eye to eye with my father, there being a fundamental clash of politics.

I made a story up and tucked them in before joining Eleanor and my father in the lounge. She was sitting on the arm of his chair, stroking his forehead. There had been a discussion in my absence. I could feel it.

"You take Gemmie to school in the morning," he said. "Then bugger off down south like you planned. I'll pick her up."

"But she doesn't know you very well,..."

"Look," he said. "Stop creeping round them will you. Gemmie will get used to it. She'll have to do. This won't be the last time it happens, I'm sure."

"But what about Stevie? You've no idea. He'll drive you round the bend. I can't leave him,..." I had visions of the hi-fi, daubed with jam, the speakers toppled over, the CD's used as Frisbees and scattered throughout the house,...

"And when was the last time either of you changed a nappy?...."

I saw something then,... a look in Eleanor's eye. I remembered the scar and I bit my tongue.

"I'm sure Jack can work it out," she said. "After all, if you can do it, anyone can." She was smiling, but it was a forced smile and they were both looking at me as if there was something I had to know, but neither could bring themselves to tell me.

"What is it?"

Dad sighed. "You'll have to take Ellie with you."

"What?..."

"It's either that or you don't go and you look after the little bastards yourself."

Eleanor rose and made to go upstairs. "I'll explain tomorrow," she said - "On the road."

CHAPTER 13

The day began with drizzle and the dull roar of traffic heading south along the M61. It was a sluggish crawl, the grey morning seeming even darker with the light cut out on all sides by the towering loads of filthy trucks.

We cut east on the M62 and I remember that long and breathtakingly bleak stretch of motorway beyond Rochdale as we headed up to the roof of the Pennines, the russet moor rolling out on either side. Once, within living memory, this had been a pristine and lonely wilderness, now hideously scarred by this monstrous, snarling ribbon of tarmac. Change! Everything died,... Derby's, my marriage,... this landscape,... everything. Either it was transformed into some new order, or it became dissipated, lost to chaos.And I did not want my life to become lost to chaos.

We pulled in at Hartshead services for coffee. It had taken just an hour but already I felt as if I'd been on the road all day. An old Midget's not the best of cars for a long motorway journey - too hard a ride and not enough soundproofing. Also I'd felt vulnerable, tucked in among the wagons for mile after mile. One of them might have cut in and squashed us flat without even noticing. Not for the first time I'd drawn comfort from Eleanor's presence, thinking to myself in some strange way that nothing bad could possibly happen to me while she was there.

We chose a quiet table and I left her while I went for coffee. Then I happened to glance over at her from a distance, as I queued up to pay, and seeing her in context like that, it startled me how much she stood out. She was a good looking woman, indeed beautiful, and very precisely made up the carefully painted black details of her lips and her eyes and her fingernails, and then the black clothes, but it was a look that might easily have been misconstrued, if you did not know her.

I saw other people, glancing up from their tables - a couple of lorry drivers, a policeman in high-vis jacket who'd stopped off for a brew, and a party of old ladies. They probably thought she was a drug-pale prostitute, or a lap-dancer returning from a night shift in some seedy Manchester club. But if Eleanor was aware of them, she made no sign. She appeared blank, her true self invisible behind a carnival mask.

When I returned, I set the tray down, then began fussing nervously with cups and spoons and sachets of sugar but she stilled me in an instant when, suddenly, she reached out and took my hand. Her grip was cool and gentle,... a soft, boneless hand, her stillness flooding into me through the heat of her touch, great long waves of it washing up my arm, infusing every fibre of me from my head down to my toes with a strange anticipation. Then she looked up at me and said: "I had a little boy."

A child! She had a child! But since I already knew this, why did I find her confession so shocking.

"His name was Andrew," she went on. "And he died."

"Eleanor, I'm sorry - I'd no idea."

She released my hand, and just as I was preparing myself for more, she changed the subject. "Coffee smells good," she said, with an impish smile. The mask had been raised only briefly. It had been a prelude, a warning there was more to come, but she was saving that for later, for the right moment.

She drove the next leg of the journey, picking up the A1 near Leeds and heading south. She drove well, with a confidence and an assertive pressure on the accelerator that was difficult to reconcile with her otherwise fragile appearance. I waited for her to speak, to tell me more about herself, but she chose silence, immersing herself in the road ahead, her forehead wrinkled in concentration.

We drove between bleak, low lying pastures for mile after mile. Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, two hours ticking off towns unseen beyond the sterile artery of the A1: Doncaster, Newark, Grantham, two hours during which time my thoughts swung from Eleanor's revelation, back to wondering what the hell I thought I was doing.

"Lunch-time," she said.

We found a quiet lay-by, tucked behind some trees, out of sight but not quite out of sound of the road. We had a quick stretch of our legs and Eleanor produced a picnic from the boot, but there was a cool wind cutting across the weed strewn tarmac, so we settled back inside to eat. Eleanor had on a long black coat and a snug black woolly hat. She looked warm and fresh and happy, but then I saw her eyes darken, and she lowered her gaze into the depths of her cup.

"I've been to prison," she said.

I tried to react casually but I'm a poor actor and I fear it was

obvious to her how shocked I was. "Oh,.. really?"

"I killed my little boy. "

I felt my heart shrink suddenly in my chest,... felt it plummet to the icy depths of my bowels, and this time I chose silence, holding myself still and tight, waiting for her to go on.

"What do you say to that then, Tom? "

I swallowed hard. "I take it there's more to this than you're telling me. Did you?... I mean,... "

"Did I really kill him? Well, the clever men in court said I did,... so I must have mustn't I?"

"Not necessarily. Did you?"

She seemed to leave me hanging on for a long time. "No," she said at last. "I'm sure of that now. But I wasn't clear about it for years, for maybe half of my life."

She spoke calmly. It was the only way she could tell me these things, under the rigid iron guard of an icy calm.

"How long ago?" I asked, still trying to control the tremor in my voice.

"I was sixteen. Not much older than your Rachel."

"And the father?"

"I haven't seen him since the trial. I was in prison for eighteen months. Then they said I hadn't meant to kill him, that I was merely insane, so I was sent to a sort of secure hospital,... only I'd rather have stayed in prison. I was there for five years,.... and I was really crazy when I came out.

"He was in his cot, do you see? That's where I put him, all safe and sound, and in the morning, he wasn't breathing. So, I can't be around children. It's not that I don't like them, and I do love Stevie and Gemmie but I can't trust myself. I'd be afraid of them going to sleep and not waking up if I was in the same house. It's irrational, I know, but then I'm not a rational person any more. Do you understand that, Tom? Jack was afraid it would be too much for me - being in the same house as them while you were away. Jack knows me in ways that you do not. That's why I'm here - with you - because there are children in the house."

"But they were there last night."

"That was different. You were there too. You were responsible for them. I didn't have to think about them."

"But Dad's never mentioned a word of this to me."

"I made him promise. People have a hard enough time accepting

me as it is. If they knew I'd been to prison for killing a child, my own child, it would only make things worse for your dad."

"But it was a cot death. It's terrible,... and I'm so sorry, Eleanor. But it wasn't your fault. You were as much a victim of that tragedy as your poor child."

"It doesn't really matter. There's enough room for doubt, and people will always wonder, won't they, even when they have all the facts. Mud sticks and all that. Do you hate me now?"

"Eleanor,..."

"Do you?"

"Eleanor, don't be daft. I can't believe it,... really, I'm so sorry. What about your parents? I mean,.. I don't know much about you,... about your family."

She gave a thin smile, "My parents? You want to know about them? They were shopkeepers - fancy goods, that sort of thing. And they were pillars of the church, even though they spent most of their time back biting and pouring scorn on everyone else. It was bad enough I'd disgraced them by getting pregnant in the first place,... but then having the nerve to land myself in prison as well,..."

"Do you ever see them?"

"No. I have no parents. They still live in the same place as far as I know, still pillars of the same church, but they're dead to me. Shall I go on?"

She was looking me now, almost challenging me to take the full story of her life. I hesitated, because what she'd already told me was bad enough. "You mean there's more?"

"Oh yes,... you haven't heard the best bit yet. After the secure hospital, I was sent to a sort of asylum, a private place, somewhere out of the way. My parents paid for it, rather than suffer the embarrassment of having me at home. They lived in such a nice part of town you see?... and my father was on the church council. I don't know how long I was there - a year or so maybe. I suppose the bills must have been mounting and they realised they couldn't afford to keep it up. But before they let me out, they suggested I had an operation."

She became nervous now. "They'd never believed me, never really trusted me from the start, thinking I'd killed my child while I was depressed. I mean it happens doesn't it? A sixteen year old girl and a screaming baby. They just can't cope. They're bound to go

crazy. But I wasn't depressed, okay?. I was fine, so long as I was alone,.. away from them. But they wouldn't leave me alone,... I would have agreed to anything, Tom. I had to get out of that place."

"What sort of operation, Eleanor?"

"I was sterilised," she said. "You see, they even managed to convince me I was guilty,... that it was for the best if I never had any more children, so I let them do it. And I thought what the hell? I was young and horny and I imagined I could shag my way round the world without a thought for the consequences,...

"So, anyway,... after they did it, I was in a lot of pain. There was an infection, they said..." She lowered her head to the steering wheel and then I saw the tears. "They say I nearly died. In the end the only thing that saved me was a hysterectomy. You know what that is Tom?"

"Em,... I think so,..."

"I have no womb."

I had only the vaguest idea of what that meant for a woman, for a young woman - no more children obviously, but there were other effects, physical and emotional I could barely imagine.

"I went through the menopause before most girls have even had their first babies," she went on. "They can treat the physical effects but I always found the drugs made me feel either lethargic, or,... well like a bit of a nympho,... which might sound fun to you, but believe me it's not.

"Anyway, the bottom line is, I'm not like other women. I haven't had a man inside of me for over ten years now. I've tried girls, and that can be fun if you take all the gender politics out of it, but I've discovered celibacy is the best option for my peace of mind."

She looked at me then, one corner of her lips turning up into a wry sort of smile. I don't know if I'd gone pale or my mouth was agape but I think she felt the measure of my bewilderment. "Poor Tom," she said. "You're such a nice, ordinary man, you're not ready for any of this, are you?"

I suppose she was right. After her opening sentence, I had thought there was nothing else she could possibly have said that would shock me any more, but she had kept on doing it, a relentlessly shocking confession that had pushed me through ever deeper layers of trauma.

"Well,... I'm not completely naive," I said, and even as I spoke I was still adjusting to the fact that Eleanor, my father's wife, was not

only half his age,... but also, apparently and by her own admission, a Lesbian.

"I didn't say you were naive, Tom. You're,... just so admirably, wonderfully,... nice. Like your dad. I treasure what I have with him, you know?"

"But,... has there ever been anyone else, anyone special, I mean in the past?"

"Not really. I was up and down so much you see?... my hormones all over the place? There are times when I want physical love,... and there are times when the thought of it leaves me cold. You can't build a sexual relationship on that sort of foundation can you?

"No. And anyway, I've been in and out of loony bins for years which doesn't exactly boost your chances of meeting someone special - or so I thought. But in the end, that's where I met your dad, and the last three years with him are the longest I've ever felt free of my past. I've spent a lifetime propped up on antidepressants, but I've managed to get off the pills now - just relaxing, meditating - that seems to be enough. It has to be good,... doesn't it?"

"A miracle, I'd say, after what you've just told me."

"It must be hard for people to understand,... me and your father."

It was hard, I thought, and getting harder. "You want to be together," I said. "Where's the harm in that?"

She smiled. "No harm at all."

It was another hour and a half to Cambridge, then half an hour along narrow lanes, heading east across the bare, flat fens in search of Lipton. We found it tucked away and seemingly deserted, a row of low cottages, a church and a pub - The Dog and Gun. "This looks like it," I said, pulling up on the car park.

"But we can't just sit here for five hours," said Eleanor. "And there doesn't appear to be much else to do."

"I know,... Look, Ely's not far. There's a cathedral. There'll be a tea shop or something. We'll have a look around there and come back later."

"Sound nice. By the way Tom?"

"Hmn?.. "

"You meant it didn't you? When you said earlier that knowing what you know about me hasn't changed anything - I mean between us,... the way you see me? "

Of course it had changed things, and to be honest right then I couldn't say how, only that it wasn't in a bad way. "Sure, I meant it. Look, you and me,... well, it's a bit unusual isn't it? For a long time I didn't know how to treat you. I mean, I can't think of you as my mother, or even a sister and I don't know for sure that I'll ever work it out except to say,...." I hesitated but she leaned closer, encouraging me to go on.

"What?"

"Well,... only that my life's the better for having you in it - especially now."

Eleanor sat back, blushing. "Tom, that's lovely. Thank you." Her eyes were wet. I'd touched her, and I was amazed because it had seemed like nothing. No one had ever touched me like that, not so easily with words. Oh, there had been many a tender word offered to me over the years, but I fear they had not meant half so much as they might have done, had they been spoken by someone else,... had they been spoken by Rachel. But Rachel was a dream, an unreliable memory of times long gone, and after what Eleanor had told me I felt ashamed by the insignificance of my problems. My marriage was being dismantled and my time at Derby's was coming to an end. So what? I thought. At least my mind and body were still mostly intact.

Get over it, I thought, but sitting there on that car park, outside the barred and shuttered Dog and Gun, my heart ached. I gazed up and down the street at the forlorn little houses and at the dreary plain beyond the gaps in the rooftops, and I felt the emptiness of the place dissolving me completely. Rather than offer some perspective, the horror of what Eleanor had told me had only served to make things worse. I ached for her loss, for her pain and I ached for myself, for my ruined life, for everything that seemed to be slipping away. But most of all I ached, wondering what my life would have been like, if only Rachel had loved me.

CHAPTER 14

The Dog and Gun was packed when we returned. It was an old place, and obviously the only show in town for miles around, so it was something of a focus. Inside, it was small and dimly lit, the air thick with cigarette smoke, the atmosphere rowdy. We had to wait a while before we spied a table and I felt conspicuous, nursing a half-pint glass as inevitably everyone's eyes were drawn to Eleanor.

"You're not from round here then?" observed the landlord. He was a big man with a badly set nose and a gruff manner. "You and your lady passing through?"

"Meeting an old school friend in here actually. I haven't seen him since we were kids. I was hoping you might know him - I probably wouldn't recognise him now - John Ogilvy?"

The landlord gave a smile, then winked at some old guy who was slumped over a pint at the bar beside us. "This gentleman's lookin' for John."

The old timer looked up at me. He was wrinkled and toothless, and smelled of beer and urine in equal measure. "Owe you money?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Good, 'cos you'd be buggered if he did."

"Will he be in tonight, do you know? Only he said he would be and I've driven a long way."

The landlord gave my arm a conspiratorial pat, without actually letting me in on whatever the secret was. "He'll be along all right. Star attraction is our John. I'll tip you the wink, though you're not likely to miss him."

We ordered a meal and huddled down at a rickety table, elbows and eyes and pint glasses all around us, the noise and the conspicuous dance beat coming from the juke box making us lean close so we could hear one another in case one of us spoke, but neither of us did. Some of the younger lads were downing lager at an alarming rate and it made me nervous, the way they looked at us. We waited it out for three hours, eating and drinking slowly, Eleanor bearing the discomfort in silence. At one point I reached out and drew my sleeve back to reveal the dial of my watch. Instead of shouting over the music and the din, I raised my eyebrows to her and motioned to the time with my eyes but at once, she covered the dial with her hand and shook her head. "Give it a bit longer," she

mouthed.

Then there came a rousing cheer as a wiry little chap bumbled in through the door. He had a great shock of white hair and a bright red nose set in a horribly scarred and wrinkled face. The landlord came over to take away our plates. He was clearly amused.

"There's your man," he said.

Eleanor looked at me. "But he must be ninety."

The landlord laughed. "Who? John? He's no more than forty five, I'd say."

John seemed to relish the attention and his hand shot up in appreciation. He walked poorly, hardly able to lift his feet from the floor which gave him a strange shuffling gait. Under his arm he carried an opaque Tupperware box tied with string. He made straight for the bar, the crush of drinkers parting at once to let him through.

"Well go on then," said Eleanor. "Go and introduce yourself."

"It's a mistake," I said. " It must be,... "

"Only one way to find out. Go on, then we can get out of here!"

I'd plotted deviously and travelled all day to put myself in the same room as John Ogilvy but now I found myself wanting. I couldn't believe this was the man I'd spoken to on the telephone. I approached warily and offered to buy him a drink.

"Who the bloody hell are you?" he said.

I extended my hand in greeting. "I'm Tom,... Tom Norton. We spoke on the 'phone."

"Who?"

He ignored my hand, and I felt at once I was dealing with an ignorant, and already very drunk old man.

"Tom Norton," I repeated. "I rang you."

"Who?"

"County High, nineteen seventy seven?"

"Bloody hell. I can't remember that far back. Mine's a double - get me blood up."

Could it be him, I wondered? The quiet, serious lad with all the 'O' levels and the wealthy parents and the brilliant prospects - the quiet, serious lad who had not been afraid to ask Rachel for a date? And was she here, I wondered? In this same village? Would she be coming in later? And would she also be so hideously transformed as this? I had visions of running from the place screaming. Sure, I wanted to lay the past to rest, to stare it calmly in the eye and bid it

farewell but I did not expect it to stare back like this and make fun of me. I wanted it to be warm and comforting. I did not expect it to leap at me with its fangs bared.

He dropped his box on the bar-top and snatched the whiskey down. The box puzzled me. There were scratching sounds coming from inside and it appeared to be moving. Then the corner lifted a crack and I drew back at the sight of silvery whiskers and a pair of sharp teeth poking out. It was a rat. Quickly, John thumped the lid back down. "Get back in there you little bugger," he said and then he turned to me.

"Tom, did you say? I don't remember you. How do I know you're not pulling my leg? Come on, giz some names, then."

"Well,... let's see. there was Josh Turner,.... Carol Gent,.... Graeme Cardman,...."

But it was hopeless. He'd was so far gone, I doubt he was even capable of remembering his mother's name, let alone faces from twenty years ago. I was wasting my time! It was late, I was tired and when I glanced over at Eleanor, I could see she was tired too. I turned my back on John, dismissing him from my thoughts and hopes. Instead, I leaned over the bar to the landlord. "Do you have any rooms?"

"Only the one. It's a twin."

I could feel my disappointment at the way the evening had turned out weighing me down and without even stopping to think, I said: "I'll take it."

By this time, John had picked up his box and was sloping off into the thick of the bar. "Hang on," I shouted. "What about Rachel Standish?"

Perhaps he had not heard, or had chosen not to hear because he carried on as if I hadn't spoken.

The landlord shook his head. "You'll get nothing out of him tonight. You'd be better catching him at home in the morning. He lives out at Marsh farm. It's on the Ely Road. Remind me at breakfast and I'll draw you a map."

Rejoining Eleanor, I gazed across at this horrible old geezer as he disappeared into a side room with his box. Locals were pressing in behind him, slapping him on the back, and I saw money changing hands in anticipation of some disgusting event the likes of which I shuddered to imagine.

"It's not him," I said. "He can't be the same age as me. Even with

a bad haircut, I don't look as knackered as that, surely?"

She smiled sleepily. "He just drinks more than you do. And I'd say he's had an accident,... a bad one. Did you see how he was walking. What's in the box?"

"You don't want to know."

"Aren't you going in there with him?"

"No, he's too drunk. Anyway I know where he lives. We might call in the morning on our way home."

"Might? "

"Depends how I feel - hopefully a lot better than I do right now. I've em,... got a room,... got you a room."

"A room? You mean there was only one?"

"I'm sorry. I did it without thinking. You take it. I'll see if can find somewhere else."

She looked around in horror. "Forget it, I'm not stopping here on my own."

"No, of course not. It was stupid. I'll say we've changed our minds. We'll go back to Ely. We'll find a hotel."

She thought a moment, then shook her head. "It's too late to go running about looking for somewhere to stay at this time of night. Let's go and look at it. Then we'll decide."

"I should've booked ahead. I don't know why I didn't. "

"That was my fault. You thought you were travelling alone until last night. Don't worry. We'll work something out."

I was following her from the bar when a well dressed old gent stepped between us. He pressed a folded newspaper against my chest like it was the barrel of a gun and then he leaned close.

"She send you?"

I was too weary and too disappointed to appear startled. "Eh?"

He was a bit drunk as well, as seemed everyone in the Dog and Gun that night. He was in his early seventies and had a neatly clipped moustache, like some former military type. "His ex-wife! She sent you didn't she?"

"You mean Rachel?"

"Come on, come on. Don't play games with me."

For all his bluster, I could have knocked this man down by simply stepping away from him. Of course, it meant we'd got the right John Ogilvy and I couldn't decide if this was good or not.. "You know Rachel?" I asked. And then it registered: he'd said ex wife!

"'Course I know her. Bloody tart shagged her way round this village like bitch on heat."

I swallowed hard, inwardly seething at the insult. "Does she still live in this area?"

"Course she doesn't. Do you think she'd dare show her face round here again?"

"I don't know," I said. "Why shouldn't she?"

By now, Eleanor had realised I wasn't behind her and had come at the gent from behind, floating up quietly as was her way. "Where is she then?" she asked.

He turned, startled by her voice at once so near and was then yet further startled by her appearance. "She,.... she,.... didn't send you?"

Eleanor smiled - a thin, sinister slit of a smile that sent a chill down my spine. "Would we be looking for her if she'd sent us?"

"I,... I suppose not."

"So, can you help us, or can't you?"

"You're looking for her?"

"Did we say that?"

"Are you the police? "

I brushed the newspaper from my chest. "Look, who are you?"

"I'm John's father," he said. "So just you keep away from him. He's had enough trouble in his life since getting tangled up with her."

John's father!!... and so hostile at the very mention of Rachel. There was a great deal I could have asked him, and much I could have learned, but the landlord intervened. "Come on then Harry," he said with a wink in my direction. Then he guided my drunken assailant out of harm's way. Eleanor locked eyes with me, a single brow curling up quizzically. "You don't like it when people call Rachel a tart, do you?"

The room wasn't as bad as I'd feared. It was at the top of a narrow staircase, right up in the attic with a great beam almost splitting it in two, one bed each side of the beam. The decor was plain but pretty and I could smell fresh paint.

"It's lovely," she said.

"You think we can manage? Really, I'm sorry Eleanor. You deserve better than this. I mean sharing with me."

"It's fine Tom. It's just for the night."

I left her to settle in while I went back down for the bags. When

I returned, I knocked and she said it was okay but I pushed my way in to find her peeling off her underwear.

"For pity's sake, Eleanor,... "

"What's up?" She reached round and carelessly unclipped her bra. "You'd better turn around for a moment then if you're shy. But if you recall you've already seen everything I've got."

While I waited for her to finish, I thought back to what she'd told me earlier on the road, and then I realised the significance of the black, for now I knew she wore only black - black coat, black cardigan, long black dress, black tights and shoes, black bra, black pants - black lipstick and eye liner, black nail varnish.

It was more than a fashion statement, more even than, as she had once tried to tell me, a means of ensuring she was not invisible to people. It was perhaps a thing more deeply coupled with her sense of being, and the loss of something she could never have again. I undressed in the bathroom and settled down in bed across from her. She was looking at me, smiling. Perhaps it amused her that men still found her alluring, and certain women too, apparently. But could it really be true that for all her warmth and compassion, there was no longer the slightest hint of anything sexual in her own psyche? Was it possible to cut it out, as surely as they had cut out her womb?

"This is stupid," I said.

"I think it's quite cosy. I've always thought we should get to know one another better."

"I mean what we're doing here."

"No, it's not stupid. You'll find her. Then you can say what you have to say and move on."

"I'm not sure I want to find her now."

"You're afraid of something. Afraid of what she's really like?"

"I suppose that's it. The more I find out, the less she seems like the girl I remember. It doesn't change the way I feel. It just hurts more."

"But we can't judge people from what others tell us. Those who only know me from what they read in the papers twenty years ago would have formed a very bleak picture, wouldn't you say? A woman who murdered her own child?" She was quiet for a while. "There is one possibility here of course and I'm not sure if you've considered it."

"What's that?"

"How about instead of brushing you off those big, bright eyes of hers light up and she says 'yes'? You must admit, it is a possibility, and we know she's not with John any more."

"I'm not doing this to get myself a woman - it's not that simple. I have a woman. I'm still married,... just about. Another woman right now would kill me."

She turned over and switched off the light. "But Rachel's not likely to understand that, is she?"

For the first time then I felt something and I stared up at the ceiling unable to believe the sudden shift in my feelings. Up until that moment all that had mattered to me, when the time came, was that Rachel proved my idiotic point and said 'no'. But Eleanor was right: it was a possibility. *How about instead of brushing you off those big bright eyes of hers light up and she says yes?...*

I lay back, stared up into the darkness, and my mouth ran dry at the prospect.

CHAPTER 15

In the morning, we came down to the bar to find it empty. In its midst stood a single table adorned with crisp linen and carnations and the most delicate china. To my mind, none of it seemed to sit well in a room smelling strongly of stale beer and last nights cigarettes but Eleanor smiled to see it, half turning to me, her lips parted in delight.

"Isn't it lovely? " she said.

"You really should get out more."

A matronly woman was hovering in the doorway to the kitchen. "Sit you down my loves," she said. "You'll be John's old school-pal then. I heard about you, last night."

"He didn't seem to recognise me."

"Well, I wouldn't read much into that. He was probably just pulling your leg - bit of a character is our John."

"I could see that. What happened to him?"

Our hostess was quiet for a while and then she sighed. "Clever lad was John. Wouldn't credit it now, would you?"

"And Rachel?" I asked, pushing my luck.

She gave another sigh. "People said she should have stuck by him. But what do they know? Well, you've only got to look at him haven't you? Bless him. I think I might have gone off the rails myself. Well,... enough said. What'll it be my loves?"

The damp night had given way to a thick fog that clung to everything. I emerged from the Dog and Gun feeling calm and refreshed, a feeling that vanished on turning the ignition key to find the damp had eaten into the Midget's electrics. It whined pitifully, rocking gently with each turn of the starter motor, but the engine refused to catch.

"Poor thing's still tired," said Eleanor.

I flipped the bonnet up and uncoupled the leads, then dried the plugs with my handkerchief.

"So what do you think happened to John then?" I said.

"Oh, any number of things can do that to a man."

"Could it just be the drink?"

"Something always causes the drink, Tom. Loneliness, despair. Anyway, you've still not told me what was in the box."

"Em,... Can you give it a try, now?"

The engine fired and restored my mood at a stroke. "Okay, let's go. The sooner we find him, the sooner we can get back home. Dad will probably have strangled Stevie by now."

"You underestimate Jack."

"I know. And he asks for it sometimes. To be honest I just want to spend some time with them."

But of course, a part of me was afraid and wondering if I should go on. In making contact with John Ogilvy this had become more than a game I played in my head. For the first time in my search, I had begun to touch people, people who had known Her and I was gripped with a sense that there was no going back, that sooner or later word would reach her that I was coming.

I drove slowly, walking pace almost on account of the fog, and barely able to see the kerb as we crawled our way along the little lanes. Eleanor navigated from the map we'd had drawn for us and eventually we found ourselves on what we reckoned must have been the Ely road.

"This is it," she said. "Just turn in here."

After a long muddy drive down a potholed track, we came upon the ghostly grey silhouette of a sagging farmhouse. It looked ancient, seventeenth century perhaps, like something from a movie set. There were dogs barking, not the wiry collie-dogs I was used to from the farms back home, but rottweilers, a pair of them, great ugly brutes yanking fiercely at their chains - not the sort of dogs renowned for their finesse with sheep, nor people.

Eleanor froze when she saw them and I wasn't for moving either. Then a big angry looking woman came out of the house and cowed the dogs into silence with her sharp tongue before greeting us with an abrupt "Well?"

I wound the window down a fraction. "We're looking for John Ogilvy."

The mention of his name didn't do much to improve her mood. "So am I," she scowled. "He didn't come home last night. He's probably lying in a ditch somewhere between here and the Dog and Gun."

"He was in there last night," I confirmed. "I'm Tom. I was supposed to meet him for a chat but he was a bit,...."

"Drunk?"

"Well,... distracted,...."

She thought for a while, running a suspicious eye over both of

us. "He never mentioned you."

"We were at school together," I said. "I was in the area, so I said I'd drop in for a chat."

"He usually rolls home about ten but I can't guarantee he'll be in much of a better state than when you last saw him."

"Would it be all right to wait?"

She tightened her lips, a gesture I likened to drawing the string on a purse. I felt we were not particularly welcome. Perhaps John's father had telephoned her,... warned her to be on her guard.

"Come from up north have you?"

"That's right."

"Well, all right then. You'd better come in. Dogs won't touch you. They're softies really. I'm Pauline, his wife."

"Em,... thanks."

And as we followed her inside, I felt Eleanor pinch my arm. "Told you it would be Pauline," she whispered.

On closer inspection, I could see there was money here. Someone had worked hard at renovating the place, but without sacrificing that olde worlde look, and there was a classic Porsche peeping from the barn - early sixties, I thought and worth a fortune.

Inside, the kitchen was modern yet designed to co-ordinate with the low beams and the rustic feel of it all. "Great place," I said, unable to reconcile what I saw with the derelict of a man I'd seen last night - unless all this was hers, that he'd married into it after Rachel had left him.

Pauline sat us down at the table and made coffee. She seemed to have softened a little in her manner, but I sensed that hard edge was never far away and I took it as a warning to tread carefully with her.

"I knew he went to school up north somewhere," she said. "But he doesn't talk about it. In fact he doesn't talk about much these days,... at least nothing that makes any sense."

Eleanor took a copy of the photograph from her bag and laid it on the table. "He's changed a lot," she said. "Tom barely recognised him."

Pauline gazed at the picture for a moment but didn't work up much of an interest, even when I pointed him out. Rachel also escaped her gaze, and seemed to confirm my belief that she must have undergone a dramatic transformation as well.

"Had a bad time, has John," she said.

"I've sort of lost touch really," I replied. "But I remember he was a clever lad,... best in our year."

"Oh he was. He went to Cambridge, you know?"

"Really?"

Pauline seemed proud of this distinction, so I played upon it and gradually she began to respond. "He tutored maths there in the end. But that was before the accident, of course,..."

"He had an accident?"

Pauline sat across from us and glanced at the long cased clock by the door. "He used to travel over there every day. He had a motorbike. Stupid bloody things, motor bikes. He was doing seventy across the fen when he hit a tractor - foggy morning, bit like this."

"Really? Poor bloke!"

"Nearly died, he did. Might have done too for all his first wife could have cared."

"Oh?"

"She was from up north, too," she said and there was a sneer, for surely nothing good could ever come from up- north. "He brought her down with him. Selfish cow."

"I think I remember her," I said. "What was her name? Was it Evelyn?"

"Rachel," she corrected. "Couldn't handle it - I mean he was a bloody vegetable for years. Me? I lived across at Hampson's Farm in those days. I used to just pop in and see if there was anything I could do - ended up nursing him while she was off with some fancy man of a night - well,... what did she expect?"

"So they lived here then?"

"That's right - not that it was theirs, not then anyway. It belonged to Tom's Aunt. She was getting on a bit and they lived with her. Course when the old girl died, John got everything."

I felt a sudden excitement, and for a moment all I could think was that She had lived here. She had sat at this table, and the image of this old farmhouse must have burned itself deep into her memory. "When was all this?"

"Oh, fifteen years ago now, maybe more,... all water under the bridge as far as I'm concerned."

Fifteen years! Rachel had been gone from this place for fifteen years! "And she just left him?"

"Went back up north. She was working for a firm over in Norwich. Bexleys. They were expanding and they opened a factory

round Salport, or somewhere like that, so she took a job up there. Best thing I'd say and good riddance. She knew her face wasn't welcome round here any more."

"What sort of job did she do?"

"She worked on a machine, as far as I know."

And I was thinking, Salport? Salport? I'd never heard of it. Did she mean Salford? or Southport?

"Bexley's did you say?"

"They make bottles." She glanced at the clock again and I sensed her patience was on the wane - too many questions about Rachel perhaps. "I don't know where John's got to," she said. "What if I gave him your number?"

"Sure. Thanks for your time. I'm sorry to have missed him."

And then we were outside with the dogs barking and Pauline yelling at them to be quiet. I took a last look at the farm and I shook her hand. "Many thanks. I do hope he gets home all right."

Then I took Eleanor by the elbow, and we were off.

"What's the hurry," she said.

"I just wanted to get away. I didn't want John to turn up suddenly and us get stuck with him."

"Charming!"

The fog had lifted by now and a watery sun was filtering through from above. As we turned out onto the Ely road, I saw him ambling along in his shirt sleeves. He'd lost the box and as we passed him, I saw fresh bite-marks all over his face. I didn't acknowledge him and he didn't recognise me. I wondered then how it was that our histories could once have been so bound up and yet leave us, twenty five years down the line, as total strangers.

Eleanor reached into her bag, pulled out Rachel's picture and stared at it for a long time. "How much do you reckon that place was worth?" she said.

"Half a million, maybe more."

"A lot of money."

"Sure."

"And she gave it up, rather than share her life with someone she no longer knew - someone who looked like the person she loved, but wasn't there any more."

"You're putting it as delicately as you can, but basically she ran off."

"On the face of it, yes. And on the face of it, Pauline's an angel,

taking on what she did. Or is she?"

"You mean she did it for the money?"

"Why not? If you ask me, I'm with Rachel. It must have been terrible for her."

"Thanks," I said and I meant it, because the bitterness Rachel had left behind had been getting to me. The good people of Lipton had seen only the one side, the darker side, the side whose surface is never scratched by gossip. But Eleanor had pictured her sitting at that kitchen table, a lonely and frightened woman, perhaps crying into the night and not knowing what the hell had hit her.

It was self defence I know but this fitted more my idealistic image of her, an image that had been increasingly tarnished in recent weeks, and I clung to it.

Eleanor leaned over and rested her head against my shoulder. "What now?"

"Home by tea time."

"I mean about her."

"Nothing," I said. "It's over."

"You can't mean that, surely - there's Bexley's Bottles."

"But so much could have changed in fifteen years - it seems a bit foolish to expect that if I find Bexleys Bottles, I'll also find her. She could be anywhere."

"You've come this far. You should see it through."

"No, it's getting too dangerous. Like you said last night, what if she is looking for someone? What if she does say yes? I'm not ready for another woman. I shouldn't even be thinking of it."

"I thought you weren't."

"I'm not. I wasn't,... it's just,..."

"What?..."

How could I explain? It was already clear to me that the closer I came, the less Rachel resembled my image of her. It was to be expected of course, but in continuing to pursue the fantasy it had also begun to dawn on me that I could eventually expect to see the image destroyed completely. Is that what I wanted, I wondered? Or was there a part of me that desperately needed to go on believing in it? To go on believing in someone who didn't exist any more. Someone who had never existed outside of my own imagination.

CHAPTER 16

It was after five when we arrived home. The MG had died on us in Nottinghamshire. Rust from a disintegrating fuel tank had clogged up the feed line, and we'd had to call out the AA. Now, I felt sick with a headache and after hugging the kids, and listening to their mad banter for ten minutes, I'd had enough and went upstairs to lie down.

They'd taken over my room. The few toys they'd brought with them were scattered across the floor and the place was littered with drawings and colourings, the mad untidy energy of their presence. I could have wept. Throughout the long journey home, they had been my one thought, the only thing drawing me back to an image of home that was otherwise disintegrating fast. But now, in my fatigue, I resented their intrusion into my sanctuary and at the same time I hated myself for that selfish resentment.

My father came in with a mug of tea, stepping carefully over the toys and clearing a space on the bed so he could sit down.

He smiled, something he rarely did, and I had the impression he'd enjoyed being with them. "They take over a bit, don't they," he said.

"Thanks for looking after them. I hope they weren't too much trouble."

"I'm their fuckin' grandad," he said.

There was a definite rebuke there and it was well founded. Annie and I had always seemed to fall in with whatever her parents were up to - lunches on Sunday, such-a-body's wedding, such-a-body's Christening and ooh, you must come or it will look bad. So one way or another I'd never seemed to spend much time in Middleton any more,... except now of course.

"Anyway," he said, "They were okay. Pair of little bastards when they're tired though."

"Aren't they just."

"Did Ellie say anything while you were away?"

"Yes. She said quite a lot in fact."

"I thought she might. So now you know, eh?"

I took a breath. "Now I know. She's very special Dad - I mean to go through all that and still be such a good person - I mean not end up hating the world."

"She needs love, Tom. But more than that she needs someone."

I think it was the first time I recall my father ever uttering the word 'love' and it took me by surprise. He loved me, I knew that, and he'd loved my mother too but he'd never told us so. It was something we'd been led to assume if only because he'd never said anything to the contrary.

"She's doing fine, now," I told him. "Since she met you. You both are."

"You'll see she's all right, though, won't you? I mean if anything should happen to me."

"Don't go morbid on me, Dad. It's not like you."

"I'm not being morbid. Just realistic." The sensitive tone began to harden. "Listen. I'm getting on in years, right? And things happen. So, you'll see she's all right? Keep an eye out for her."

His almost angry persistence sobered me at once: "Of course I will."

"Fine then," he said, and before I'd grown used to the fact that it was a serious matter, perhaps the most serious matter we'd ever shared, he'd changed the subject. "Did you find this Standish woman then?"

"Not exactly. She'd moved on. Have you heard of Bexley's Bottles?"

"Southport. They shut down about five years ago,.. Alfred Jenks used to work there. You remember Alfred? Lives down Hinkley street."

"They shut down? But I thought Alf worked at some moulding company. They owned the Stanley Mill on Cross Lane."

"That's right. Bexley's took them over."

"Don't tell me," I said. "There's a supermarket there now."

"D.I.Y. store."

That was the end of it, then. I almost felt relieved. She really could have been anywhere now. The fantasy would remain for ever intact.

He rose to go. "Oh, before I forget," he said. "Some bird rang while you were away. I told her you'd call her back when you got home. I said you were away on business."

"Some bird?"

"Carol. She sounded all right. Kept me talking for ages. I reckon you could be in there."

"I'm still married dad."

"Not any more you're not. You should get out a bit. Give her a ring. Get laid. Move on!"

"Sometimes," I said. "I wonder which one of us is the more mature."

I felt better after a cup of tea and a rest and I was able eventually to return to the lounge and to join in the antics of my children. I found them on the sofa, Eleanor sandwiched between them, reading them a story that she embellished with silly voices and mad expressions.

Gemmie and Stevie were utterly spellbound. I sat opposite and watched them for a while, eventually to become as spellbound as they, but it upset me knowing she could have no children of her own. It was true, she had not turned out bad, as she might so easily have done, but it terrified me, how fragile she must have been on the inside!

I thought about what my father had said, about seeing she was all right when he'd gone, and I wondered for the first time in practical terms how long he might have. I supposed he could expect, another ten or fifteen years. Eleanor would be forty five by then, perhaps fifty. I had no idea if she would be all right alone, or if she would retreat inside herself. It was unthinkable that this fragile beauty might one day shrivel into nothing, into the saddest of dementias. She caught me looking and gave me a daft smile while wobbling her eyes. I smiled back, and promised her silently that it would not be allowed to happen.

Afterwards, I settled the children and watched until they fell asleep, then I gathered their drawings together and set them on the table. They were bright, frantic drawings, rather like their lives, I thought, though Gemmie's were becoming more controlled, more considered, the colours as they should be, rather than as she might actually have preferred them. I looked up and caught Rachel's eye as she gazed out at me from the photograph and suddenly it all came together, sending me crashing into the past, into the pain, and the hope, and all that useless longing and I knew I had no choice: if it was at all possible, I had to see her again.

CHAPTER 17

I have never been a people person. I have drifted though my life touching the lives of others as little as possible, which is perhaps one reason my past has dissolved so easily into deep shadow.

I could not remember the last time I'd seen Alfred Jenks, though I recall as a boy how I'd taken an injured pigeon for him to look at. I'd found it lying in the road, half mauled to death by a cat. Alf had always been a pigeon man, and he'd received me kindly. I remember him saying he'd do his best, but I guess he probably throttled the thing out of mercy as soon as my back was turned.

He had not weathered life as gracefully as my father. Not for him the designer shirts, nor the contemporary grooming. Alf, though of a similar age, dressed and looked a good twenty years older. His was the old age of cliché, the old age of expectation.

He greeted me at the door with a brightness in his eyes and the smell of whisky on his breath. "Ah, Tommy, lad. Come in. You'll have a drink with an old fella?"

"Sure, Alf. Whatever you're having."

We settled by his antiquated ceramic fireplace, a fire half way up the chimney, roaring and spitting sparks. His house was much the same as it must have been when he'd first moved in, back in the sixties There was no video, no hi-fi, no computer. In fact, looking around the most modern things I could see were an early colour television and a transistor radio.

Not that long ago, you could have gone into every house in this part of town and found more or less the same, but Alf was a dying breed with his old clothes and his pigeons and his Lancashire dialect. Somewhere in the past twenty years the world had undergone a profound change and I was only just beginning to notice.

"Still at Derby's then?" he asked.

It was, I thought, an increasingly dated opening gambit: Where do you work? What do you do? As if that alone could define you. How would we define ourselves, I wondered, when there was no longer anything worth the name: work?

"That's right," I said. "Not for much longer, though."

He shook his head in sympathy. "Heard they were shutting it. Well, there can't have been much left anyway."

"True. How long since they finished you then? Bexley's wasn't it?"

Alf shrugged. "It was still Turner's as far as I was concerned, but it's true Bexley's took us over towards the end. It's five years now since they shut it down. I just about managed to see it through to my retirement - but that's rare these days. Most of us end up on the scrapper long before then."

"It was a Norwich firm wasn't it? Bexley's? I heard they transferred some people up here."

Alf leaned back and probed his memory. "That's right. I worked with one of them in the tool-room. Barney. We used to call him Barney Balls-up. Bloody useless, he was."

"I think an old school-friend of mine moved up with that lot. Rachel. That was her name."

Alf considered this for a while. "There were some girls who came up. Bexley's specialised in bottles you see? It was high volume work, not what we were used to at Turner's really. We were more specialised, so Bexleys transferred some purpose built machinery from their place in Norwich - and the people to operate them. But it was mindless work,..."

"God knows where she is now, then," I said. "What's happening Alf? Everywhere you look they're pulling down factories and sticking up supermarkets."

It was the same old song, one my father must have sung when they were shutting the pits. Alf joined in with a plaintive sigh. "It's no great mystery, Tommy. At the end of the day making things is about, well, making things. And that means, when all the talking's done, someone has to roll up their sleeves, cut metal and put things together. For that you need a pair of these." He lifted up his hands to show me. Gnarled they were, stained yellow with nicotine, and the tip of his left forefinger was missing. "The price of a pair of hands. That's what it's always been about.

"This watch I'm wearing was made in Taiwan. Then it was shipped here and sold to me for less than someone in this country could do it, and that's why we don't make watches any more. That's why we'll never make a watch again until the price of a pair of hands over here is a lot cheaper than it is over there.

"Anyway - most of us reckoned Bexley's only wanted us so they could sell us off. They opened a new place at Skem. within a year and moved their bottle line over there."

"Skelmersdale? Did you say they opened a plant at Skelmersdale?"

"That's right. Rented a wriggley tin shed - very modern looking mind. Bexley's were always a class act."

I settled back, feeling the warm glow from the whiskey spreading through my insides. There was still a chance then, after all I thought,.... just a chance.

"You'll have another ?" he asked, nodding towards my half empty glass.

I looked at him, into his eyes and I knew that if I lived to be a hundred, I would never see the world as clearly as he. "Aye go on. Why not?"

I didn't go into Derby's the following morning. I rang Stavros and told him what had happened with the kids and he told me just to take the day off and see to them. You could do that with a big firm. They were more human somehow, and allowed time for such things as the welfare of their staff.

I dropped Gemmie at school and then sat in the car outside the gates, thinking hard. Skelmersdale was only a quarter of an hour's drive, but it was an odd place, one of the original new-towns. It was spread out over several square miles of landscaped greenery, and not the easiest of places for a stranger to navigate. I needed an address and a telephone number but I'd come prepared with my laptop and my Info-disk. Within a few minutes I'd found what I wanted.

I felt a sudden rush of adrenaline when the details appeared on the screen. I even got a map - with a little 'x' to mark the spot. It was childish, the hope that she would still be there, pushing buttons on her bottle making machine after all this time, but then much of what I'd felt and hoped and dreamed about all my life concerning Rachel was also childish, and it was that same childish hope that kept me on course as I drove over there that morning.

It's possible to pass through Skelmersdale without ever knowing you've been there, so well hidden are its inhabitants behind their grass banks and their dense screens of foliage. I knew Bexley's was in the industrial sector, so I navigated my course carefully along stretches of featureless and deserted dual carriageway, finally pulling up on the car park, in front of their reception area.

It was a small unit, rather as Alf Jenks had described it, an upmarket version of a corrugated iron barn, and brand new by the

looks of it. There was an articulated lorry just pulling away from their dispatch bay. Bexley's Bottles Dot Com., read the caption on the container. It all looked smart and bright and dynamic, but I doubt the place employed more than fifty people.

Alf had told me last night, there'd been more than six hundred at Turner's, and that had been considered a small firm in the old days. There had been two thousand at Derby's. Now we could barely muster a hundred. I wondered where everyone had gone - all those people, all those hands!

Through the smoked glass of the reception building I could see a blonde receptionist in a dark jacket taking calls from a fake mahogany desk. But having got there I wasn't sure what to do next. Did I just walk up to her and ask if Rachel Ogilvy worked there. She might even have given up her married name and reverted to her maiden name,... or married again. Panic! What the hell did I think I was doing there?

I took a moment to calm myself, then took the more devious option and called the number on my mobile. I saw the receptionist pick up the telephone.

"Hello, Bexley's Bottles. Anne speaking. Can I help?"

"Ah hello, Anne. Is possible to speak to Rachel erm,... Standish please?"

"Could I ask who's calling?"

"John. John,... erm,... Jenks."

"One moment please."

There was a pause and I could see her fiddling with her switchboard. She hadn't said: "Who?" or: "Are you sure you've got the right number?" and after a moment, she came back on the line. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

I started to sweat, for suddenly it seemed possible that in just a couple of seconds, Rachel might actually speak to me. I felt the mobile becoming hot in my hand. My ear felt like it was burning against the plastic, and waves of panic were rising through my chest.

"I'm sorry Mr. Jenks. I'm afraid Rachel's not in the office today. Can I take a message?"

I'd found her!

"Mr Jenks?...."

"Hello,... erm,... No. That's okay. Any idea when she'll be back?"

"You could try Monday."

"Okay. Monday. Thank you."

Following on from the panic, there came a brief wave of euphoria, then an inexplicable emptiness. I'd found her, but if she'd been there, if she'd picked up the telephone a minute ago, I felt sure I would have hung up. Monday! She'd be back on Monday! But even after everything I'd done, I knew I would not call her, because I hadn't changed. I was the same now as I had always been where she was concerned: weak and stupid.

CHAPTER 18

Alan was waiting when I brought Gemmie home from school. My heart sank at the sight of his car filling up the street outside my father's house, but Gemmie's eyes were dancing with delight.

"Grandad's here. Grandad's here," she chanted.

My father, she had always maintained was not Grandad - he was just Jack. We walked in to find Jack and Grandad standing in the front room, hands in pockets, an uneasy silence between them while Eleanor fastened Stevie's coat in readiness for his departure.

For once Alan was relieved to see me. "Ah. Tom. Well. Right."

"Yes. Right." I said.

"I'll get them off your hands, then. No doubt you'll be glad of the break."

"They've been no bother," said Dad.

Alan was embarrassed. "No, no,.... I'm sure they haven't. Well, anyway. We'll be getting,..."

"Annie all right?" I asked, inadvertently prolonging his ordeal.

"Oh. Fine. Anyway,...."

"Tell her,..."

"Hmnn?"

I hesitated, unable to find the words. "Nothing," I said. "Safe journey back."

There had been nothing to say. Annie did not exist any more. And even though I could not easily dispose of what we had shared,... the memories, the children, the inevitable untidiness of our separation, I sensed she would not haunt me in the way Rachel still did. I would never dry up or become rigid and useless at the mere thought of Annie.

I watched them go, following them out and waving from the end of the street. Then I felt the wrench of it, the tearing and the sense of my own selfishness for having wasted two days on the road, stalking the shadow of another past, instead of being here with my children. Now they were going and I had no idea when I'd feel their arms around my neck again. All for what? For nothing!

Eleanor had followed me out and when I turned away from my departing children, it was to find her watching me, arms folded, reading me.

"They'll be back," she said.

I forced a smile, and brushed past her, unable to look her in the eye. I walked inside to find my father on the telephone. He took my arm as I passed and handed me the receiver.

"Carol," he said and I'm afraid the rest, in spite of my resolve to the contrary, was a foregone conclusion.

"Hi, Carol. Tonight? Great. I'd love to."

Eleanor was beside me now, eyebrows raised when I hung up.

"She's wants me to go round for supper," I explained.

She looked away, something reproachful in the way she held herself. "What about Rachel?"

"Rachel won't keep me warm," I said, a little out of character, but longing for a distraction,... anything to take my mind off Rachel.

Eleanor looked hurt. "That's not like you, Tom."

"Maybe I need to change."

"You said you weren't ready for another woman. You said another woman right now would kill you."

"Well, I'm not planning to marry her."

"But is Carol right for you?"

"Does it matter? I just need to get out a bit more,... get laid, live a little."

She grabbed my arm and squeezed hard, a strange fierceness about her. "Don't touch her unless she's what you want. Have supper, talk about old times, see a movie,.. anything, but don't you touch her, Thomas Norton - not until this business with Rachel is finished."

I was surprised by the pink flush on her usually waxen cheeks, surprised to have her suddenly preach morals at me. It worked though and I felt ashamed. She released my arm and walked away, went up to her room and closed the door, leaving me to feel I had let her down. Was I so transparent, I wondered? I had spoken out of frustration, out of anger with myself, and a desire to get back at someone, but also at that moment I had wanted to take from Carol whatever was offered and with a reckless disregard for the consequences.

The drive to Carol's flat was not far, ten minutes perhaps, just enough time to warm the Midget up. As I drove, I relaxed into fantasy, imagining conversations with whoever chose to accompany me. This was a habit I'd enjoyed in my youth, but less so of late. Like the drawing and the poetry, it was a side of me that had died

and its return now came as a surprise.

The car grew cosier by the minute, a tiny capsule plying its way through the twilight gloom of Middleton, and I had many willing passengers - a stern Eleanor and even a sulking Annie for a while, then the attractive young woman from channel five news who kept probing me for my motives, asking me how I felt about Carol, how we'd met, and if I was ready for sex again after so long. I answered her in long rambling sentences that I tried out over and over, changing the words and the flow until it sounded right.

"Sex?" I said. "But it's only supper."

"You mean you hadn't considered the possibility?"

"Why no."

It was a lie, but before she could challenge me the girl was replaced once more by the stern Eleanor, arms folded, reminding me that I should not touch Carol unless I was sure. "It's not like you, Tom," she said, over and over. "It's just not like you!"

Then, as I cruised past Tescos and down the long leafy road that led up to the northern suburbs, I turned to find Eleanor had been replaced by someone else,...

It was Rachel.

She was a little older than in the photograph, about eighteen perhaps. The hair was longer, growing towards those early eighties waves. She was wearing tight black corduroys, and a blue blouse with big lapels and it seemed impossible to me that I should have seen her in such detail from that period.

"Where the hell did you come from?"

Rachel smiled. It was the long, slow smile from my most painful dream, and her dark eyes sparkled. "You saw me once, remember?" she said. "You were crossing the road in town."

Of course, I remembered it now. It was two summers after we'd left school, and me feeling like a big man already with my job and my prospects, and my wreck of a car.

"You were crossing the other way," I said, astonished as the memory crystallised. "It was a Saturday. Hot. The town was busy."

"I looked up," she said. "Our eyes met."

"I smiled at you. You looked right through me. I may as well not have been there."

"You didn't smile. You never smiled at me."

"Didn't I? I always tried to, but whenever I was around you, I became like a sleepwalker."

"So can you blame me then, for never knowing you?"

"But my feelings were so strong, you must have felt it,... like,... like electricity."

It was eerie, the feel of her. There was even a scent of something, a sharp perfume, but I think I had borrowed that particular memory from another girl I had known briefly around that time.

"I see you got the car running," she said.

"It's taken me a long time. Would it have impressed you, if you'd seen it then?"

"We'll never know, Tom."

And though she was an illusion, hearing her speak my name sent a shiver down my spine.

"So," she said. "You've been looking for me?" She darkened. "But now you're going to Carol."

"She could be my future."

"I thought you had no future until you'd closed with me."

"I haven't seen you in twenty five years, Rachel. I've just split up with my wife. I'm not thinking straight. I fastened on to you because I saw your address written down from all those years ago."

"I thought you wanted to see me, see the change in me."

"I thought so too. I was wrong. I'm sorry. Now I want you to leave me alone."

"But you've carried me with you all these years. Tell me you haven't thought of me every single day. Why not close with me, Tom? Finish it. Turn the car around and finish what you started. You came so close this morning. Come back to me, Tom! Call me. Pick up the telephone and call me!"

"I can't just remind you of who I am and then ask if you want to be with me, can I? I came close this morning, so close it made me giddy thinking how near you might be. And that's what brought me to my senses. That's why I'm going to Carol. Because I'm ready for her. I'm ready for her now."

Rachel gave me a sad smile and shook her head dreamily. "You're only doing this because you want to wash yourself in her scent, to come up breathing deeply of a different air. But it won't be different for long. I'll still be here, waiting for you. Every time you look around, I'll be there. Every time you look up, it will be in these eyes you'll see yourself reflected."

I was outside Carol's flat, now. "She's a friend, "I said. " She

called me. It would have been rude to say no. She wants company, and so do I."

"Carol's lonely. Maybe hungry too. Remember though, you can hide with her for a while, but you can't have her. You can't have anyone until you've finished with me. These are not my rules, they're yours and you know they're true." She shook her head, once more. "I'll be waiting," she said.

Carol opened the door wearing a long, tight frock. She'd done her hair, and her lips gleamed. She was my age, but she'd held on to her girlish figure.

"You look great!" I said and I meant it.

She blushed, which had not been my intention. "Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Eh?... Oh,.... the food smells great!"

"It's nearly ready. I hope you didn't mind me calling. I know you said you'd ring, but I didn't believe you."

"I would have rung. Really, I would," I said. But it might have been months,... months of indecision and the ticking of the clock, the countdown to redundancy and endless, mawkish thoughts of Rachel. No, it was better this way, I thought, better to live, to touch people.

"Em,... I've brought a bottle,..."

"Ah,... Chianti. Potent stuff! Naughty boy. Come on through, let me take your jacket. That's a lovely shirt."

I was about to tell her it was my father's but I caught myself in time, afraid it might not have conveyed the right impression, for it seemed suddenly impressions were important. And amid all of this, I was aware of her presence more than I had been last time. Last time I had taken her by surprise, but now she was ready for me. For me!

"I hope you like pasta," she said

"Sounds great."

She had prepared a table in the kitchenette, a ruby red cloth, fine china and silver cutlery - the stuff of marriages, bright hopes and long futures, now rolled out as stage props in what was perhaps for both of us a desperate seduction. Sitting down, she began to sense something of my unease.

"You okay? You looked a bit glum for a moment. "

"I haven't done anything like this for a long time," I said. "Going out with you, before, I felt a little guilty, you know, like I was

cheating on my wife - even though she'd,... even though we aren't together any more."

"I know. I felt a bit like that. I wondered about it for a while. I think it's probably more the idea of betraying what we believed we each used to have. But the reality isn't worth much is it?" She smiled, then placed her hand on top of mine and gave it a comforting squeeze. "Tom, this can go anywhere, or it can go nowhere. Let's just take it one moment at a time."

She leaned forward and fixed me with a stare. "When was the last time you went with a woman?"

"You mean with Annie?"

"With anyone?"

"Six months, maybe more. I can't remember."

"Annie,... she lost interest?"

"I suppose,... at least in me she did. I thought she was just getting older, you know? Some people do go off it, don't they? It doesn't mean the same to them. She'd be nice about it,... sometimes."

"You mean she'd lie there while you got on with it?"

"Sort of,... " I felt awkward, discussing it. It was a part of the latter stage of my marriage that hadn't made me feel good about sex, or myself.

"Then she turns up with this chap. What was his name again?"

"Alistair."

"Good looking, is he?"

"Handsome chap, yes."

"And you still blame yourself?"

The evening wasn't going as I had expected - all this openness. How was it, I wondered, every woman I knew seemed a hundred times more intelligent and intuitive than I?

"I'm not exactly without blame," I said. "We stopped talking. The children took over our lives. Everything else was written from the moment we stopped talking. Some couples survive it - others fall apart"

The pasta was bubbling on the stove, a rich sauce popping in the saucepan beside it. "Sounds about ready," she said. "Why not open the wine?"

I yanked the cork from the bottle and held it momentarily to my nose, drawing in its scent. There was earth and there was fruit and in my mind at least, there was a woman's most intimate bouquet.

We ate, and gradually the wine worked its way around my anxiety, but still, once or twice, I caught myself gazing out of the window. I couldn't see the street of course, only blackness, but I knew the Midget was down there and, inside, I sensed She was waiting. Was it true I wondered? Was I only hiding out with Carol, still avoiding the unresolved business of Rachel?

I noticed the table, the china, the cutlery, the glassware. It was the finest quality but also what struck me was the precision with which everything had been laid out - the squareness of the knives and forks to the table mats, the precise patterns in the laying out of the glasses, the salt and pepper, the teacups,...

It reminded me of a time, long ago when I'd worked with a grizzled old fitter in the assembly hall at Derby's. We'd been stripping down engines for refurbishment and in his work he'd insisted every nut, every bolt we removed be lined up in a pattern on the bench and that every component should be laid down in a certain way.

"So you can see at glance where you are," he'd said.

It was a simple philosophy, a discipline of mind that helped ensure everything we took out went back in again. Phil's workshop had been the same, the geometrical patterns acting like a fortress against the powers of chaos - the greater the risk of chaos, the greater the need for discipline. And I saw great discipline here.

After we'd eaten, I wanted to help her with the dishes but she shooed me away into the lounge. She had an impressive collection of music and her Hi-Fi was made up from separate units - Technics, Denon, JVC, and a beautiful pair of floor-standing Wharfdales. Like Eleanor, she took her music seriously.

"You like Joni Mitchell?"

"Sure," she said. "Though nowadays mostly it's baroque,... Albinoni,... Vivaldi."

"And you have Górecki!"

She seemed surprised. "You know Górecki?"

"I tend to reserve him for my darkest moods."

"I know what you mean," she said.

"Albinoni, then?"

"No,.. Górecki's just fine,... give me a minute to finish off. We'll listen together."

So we listened. We sat down, cross legged on the floor because Carol said her speakers were adjusted to sound their best at that

height. We listened to every sound, every harmonic of Górecki's 3rd, and we did not speak for a full hour. After twenty minutes, the music had coaxed the emotion from me and my eyes were wet. I was embarrassed until I realised she was crying too. Then we held each other, laying back against cushions, and when the music died, we went to bed.

Her room was cool and ordered, the duvet, neat and smooth and fresh and there were two little packets lined up squarely on the bedside table. When we began to caress, I was at once amazed by her. It was like trading in an old typewriter for a word processor and being astonished at how much things had advanced. Carol moved when I touched her, her whole body pressing into me as she rode enormous and, for me, quite daunting waves of passion. She made no secret of her arousal, indeed she shouted it, screamed it, moaned it without a care.

She also touched me, undressed me, took my sex in her hands, took possession of it. Then she undressed herself for me, presenting herself with the unhurried and sensual removal of each garment. And when I could take no more, she wrapped me in her softness, finally to make love once,.... and then again,...

I slept until sometime in the small hours, when I was awakened by the feel of her pulling the duvet around us, snuggling closer. Then her hand was coaxing me into alertness, and she was unrolling the contents of another little packet along my sex, slowly but with great precision.

I came around at dawn, still drunk with the experience. I was alone but I could hear her in the kitchen. Shortly, she returned with coffee and toast and boiled eggs. She seemed nervous, as if she might have regretted last night but then she slid another little packet from the pocket of her dressing gown and raised her eyebrows in query.

I gazed at her, a little awed, a little frightened. Her appetite was something I had dreamed of encountering all my life but somehow always missed out upon. It was only sex, but it made me feel stupidly masculine; it made me feel ridiculously good about myself.

It was later when she told me. We were dressed and showered and all ordered again when she mentioned she would have to make a decision soon about the flat. She'd found a job in the office at Freshways supermarket - something to do with accounts, but it didn't pay enough to cover the mortgage.

"So what will you do?" I asked.

"I'll have to give it up, I suppose," she replied. "My mum's been nagging me to move back with her, but I'd rather hang on to my independence if I can."

"When do you have to decide?"

"Soon," she said.

Now it may have been my imagination, but to me, even though we'd only just met, the inference was clear: "Look, Tom," she was saying, "you're a nice guy; I like you; I can give you good sex and good food. There's an opportunity here. Give it a while, then move in with me." She was not the sort of woman who liked to hang about.

I stayed until the afternoon and then I left after a long embrace on the doorstep. I was forty-two, my life in tatters, my dreams smashed to smithereens. What were the chances of my finding this again? She was a door opening, a last chance to grow old with someone

"Call you?"

"You'd better," she said.

I would. I would call her. I was sure of that, sure of her. Yes. It was right. Then I turned to the Midget and suddenly everything died - my new found spirit, my certainty of purpose fleeing at the mere sight of it. It was the car! All along it had been the car! I'd have to get rid of it.

I made my way over slowly, imagining I could see someone sitting in the passenger seat. There was no one of course. And then, driving home I tried to call Rachel into being. I wanted to hurt her, to recount the intimate details of my night with Carol,... but she was fickle and would not come. I could hear her parting words now, words I had imagined but which seemed real enough, and they were telling me once more it wasn't over until I had first closed with her.

CHAPTER 19

On Monday morning, I slouched at my desk and contemplated the telephone, not moving, not even to make coffee. Barely twenty miles from where I sat, Rachel was working. I knew it for certain. I had the telephone number on my jotter, written in my most considered hand. On the same page lay repeated over and over the age old mantra of Langholm Avenue. But no matter how hard I stared at the pad, no matter how many times I wrote her name, I could not bring myself to pick up the receiver and dial.

I was finally brought out of my trance when Stavros clapped his arm around my shoulders. "Tom!" he said. "We've got a problem with the ignition circuit."

"A problem?"

"The Swedes ran the data through their computer at the weekend. They're worried it might cut out at high temperature." He glanced around furtively, then beckoned for me to follow him into his private office.

"Is it the amplifier?" I asked, half heartedly. "We've had problems with that before."

"Sure, that's all it can be," he said. "We've cut a few up and there are voids in the encapsulation. The supplier's admitted he had a problem but says he's sorted it out now. He's got a couple for us to try. I just want someone to check his process out, and collect them."

Stavros flopped behind his desk and put his feet up. "I know what you're going to say - you know nothing about the amplifier but to be honest, Tom, everyone seems to be switching off,... they don't give a shit any more, mate."

I could have said I didn't either, but that would not have been strictly true. In my more positive moments, I was still almost a professional and anyway, I liked Stavros. There were worse people I could have been lumbered with as a gaffer and I would not have willingly let him down. It was just the thought of a long business trip that quelled my enthusiasm. I was itching to see Carol again, to feel her softness, to lose myself inside of her, tonight if I could get hold of her, and I didn't want a big block of days coming between us.

"Fernly's isn't it?" I said, trying to think of an excuse. "That's round Maidenhead somewhere."

"No, we switched supplier last year. Don't you remember? It's Wilson and Palmer over at Skelmersdale. They're a decent outfit. Nice bloke, Palmer. Have you never met him?"

"Sorry,... did you say Skelmersdale?"

I am not a great believer in synchronicity, but sometimes events conspire and I find myself wondering. I arrived in Skelmersdale after lunch. Wilson and Palmer's unit was almost identical to Bexley's and not a quarter of a mile away from it. The business there took about an hour,... an anxious but earnest Mr Wilson greeting me and then showing me around his small factory.

They were taking electronic circuits from another supplier and sealing them in plastic in order to keep the weather out. He showed me the process and then showed me some parts they'd cut up in order to examine them for evidence of unwanted air bubbles.

"These seem fine, Mr Wilson. No problems at all."

"It was a processing fault," he explained and then went into details about temperatures and pressures. It made sense and I believed him, but my mind was elsewhere. Stavros was right, I thought. He was a nice bloke, keen to please. We shared a coffee in his office and he pumped me for information about the way things were going at Derby's.

"It's shutting at the end of this year, " I told him. "But as far as you're concerned, Mr Wilson, it's business as usual. Instead of shipping the amplifiers to Middleton, you'll be shipping them to France."

"Any chance of you being taken on over there?"

"There's talk of positions for some of us. But I'm not sure if I'd want to go."

He must have been in his early sixties and he came across as fatherly and concerned. "Why ever not?" he said. "It seems like a wonderful opportunity - and you know the business. I suppose it's a big step though if you have children. I mean you have their lives to consider as well, and your wife,...."

"Not married," I said, though I don't know why, for in spite of everything, I still felt married. I couldn't help it.

"Then there's nothing stopping you."

Wasn't there? I wondered, trying and still failing to reason it all through. I still had two months to work and I was carrying on as if at some point someone was going to turn around and announce that we wouldn't be closing after all, that it had all been a joke or a

mistake.Was that human nature, I wondered, to hang on and hope for the best?

He saw me out and we shook hands on the car park. "I hope it all works out for you, anyway, Tom," he said. "Give me a call if there's anything I can do. He was a stranger, yet he seemed so genuinely concerned I began to wonder if I had better not be more concerned for myself than I apparently was. When he'd gone, I stood on the car park and looked around at the little industrial units scattered about. At one time I might have been curious to know what went on behind those walls, curious to explore the diversity of their enterprise, but try as I might, the world of work just didn't seem that important any more.

I glanced at my watch. It was a little after four. By the time I'd driven over to Derby's, I'd have barely quarter of an hour before it was time to drive home again. It would be too late to do anything with the amplifiers today. I could take them in tomorrow morning,.. and Bexley's Bottles was only five minutes away!

I was drawn as I'd known full well I would be. I had told myself it was right to finish it. It would open the way for me and Carol, perhaps even for the two of us clearing off to France and setting up home together beneath her cosy duvet in some romantic Parisian apartment. But that was not the real reason. Thinking back, there was no reason, at least none beyond the sheer inevitability of it.

When I walked into Bexley's reception area, I felt every millilitre of blood sinking down into my feet. The blonde girl looked up. She was bright and friendly.

"Hello there," she said. "Can I help?"

"Em,...."

What to say? Name perhaps?

"My name's Norton. Em,... I was,...."

Strangely then her expression changed, cutting off the timid flow of my words. It was as if something had clicked inside her head and, inexplicably, she seemed to take possession of me. "Mr Morton. Yes. We're expecting you."

"Eh? No,.... Norton."

"That's right, Mr Morton."

Then another voice came from one side, soft, speculative, welcoming. "Mr Morton?"

It was a voice, unheard in a quarter of a century and yet instantly remembered. Slowly then, I turned,....

CHAPTER 20

She was the same. Same face, same hair, same figure. She was even balancing on the sides of her shoes as she had been apt to do as a girl and the sight of her shot me through with such a force I could not speak.

"Come through," she said. Her hand was extended, beckoning me to her. I felt the receptionist pressing a name-badge into my hand: "James Morton, Visitor," it read.

I looked down at it as if in a dream. It was a mistake. They were expecting someone else. But how to explain?...

She was smiling at me, beaming pleasantness and it was too much. It was like the blast from a furnace. I could feel the skin on my face blistering with the heat and I felt a tightness in my chest, so that I could hardly breathe.

"No need to be nervous," she was saying. "We're quite harmless."

Then I was with her,... with Her. The door swung shut behind us and we were walking down a narrow corridor, shoulder to shoulder, quite close and smiling still. I was thinking I would have to explain, but not there, not in the corridor - she was moving too briskly. I'd tell her when she stopped. A mistake! It would all come out and we'd laugh and I'd say: "Can I take you for a meal after work, perhaps?"

Then her eyes would slide away. There'd be a slow shake of the head, an embarrassed silence,...

"It's all right," I'd tell her. "It was lovely to have seen you again."

Then I'd walk out, gather up the pieces of my life and examine what was left to carry on with. But for now, I remained silent, stunned by the hot needles piercing me from every angle. And as of old it seemed she did not know me, nor had she any idea of the effect she was having.

"I'm Rachel, by the way," she said.

"Rachel,... yes,..."

"It's just in here."

She opened a door and walked into a cool office. I followed and was mesmerised by the sight of her unfastening her jacket. She swung it round gracefully like it was a cape before dropping it over the back of a chair. Then she took a seat behind a dark, shiny topped desk and looked up at me, fixing me with her eyes - ebony,

the same dark wells I remembered, and she smiled again.

"Please sit down, Mr. Morton."

I sat opposite, frantically searching for the right words. At first I saw and felt only her, but then, following those eyes into the room I realised we were not alone. We were sitting, not at desk but at long table around which were seated three men,.... shirt sleeved and somewhat weary-looking.

There was a young man at the head of the table and for some reason I noticed his shirt was the best in the room. It had a certain stylish flair and he wore his fine mop of mousy hair in a long pony tail. He was the gaffer, I thought. I looked at Rachel for a way out but her eyes, like everyone else's, were now fixed on him.

"Mr. Morton," he said.

"Em,..."

"I'll be honest, Mr Morton. It's been a long day. We must have had twenty people through that door and not found anyone suitable, so I'll cut out the preamble if I may and just ask you directly what you know about Solid-Form?"

Now, it so happened that I knew a lot about Solid-Form. It was a computer aided design system and had been part of my workaday life for as long as I could remember. Without thinking I just said: "What version?"

That stumped him and he turned to another young man who had a prominent and pimply nose. "Version?" he said, obviously eager to please his boss. "Well, the latest, I suppose. We only take delivery next week. Version three, isn't it?"

"Three's still on Beta, as far as I know," I said, revelling in the vernacular. "I work with two point nine. I'm sure that's the commercial standard."

"Okay," said the pony tail. "Regardless of version, how much experience do you have?"

"About seven years."

But Pimply Nose wasn't having that. He was piqued I'd been able to catch him out and now he was looking for revenge. "I thought it had only been on the market for two," he said.

Slowly, through the fog of this surreal and egotistic banter, reality caught up with me: I'd blundered into an interview, and astonishingly I seemed to have all the right answers.

"It used to be called Compu-net," I explained. "Then Solid-Form took them over and changed the name, that's all."

Pony Tail was riffling through his papers. "Sorry,... I don't seem to have your details here. Can you tell us what it is you do?"

And so it went on, deeper and deeper. I don't know why I stayed beyond the rare pleasure of Rachel's proximity. I simply felt the moment take me, and I allowed myself to go with it. But Pimply Nose didn't think my experience of marine engines was of much significance. "I mean you do know what we make here?" he asked, apparently trying to lay another trap for me.

"Well,... bottles. Plastic mouldings, isn't it? High production rates, I imagine."

Pony Tail held up a little medicine bottle and gestured to the computer workstation beside me. "Can you model one of these for us?"

"Sure." I became aware then of the computer workstation at my elbow. I nudged the mouse and the black screen burst into colour, presenting me with a familiar menu layout. It was easy. They were beginners in the world of computer modelling and they were after someone experienced to light the way.

I glanced at Rachel while I worked. She was looking studiously at her notes - doodling. Bored stiff, I thought. It was an expression I had seen countless times before in class, and the memory of it haunted me. How could she look like that, I wondered? What right had she? How could she be the same after all this time?

It took me five minutes to create a computer model of the bottle. It wasn't to scale or anything but all the main features of it were there. It shaded up beautifully and when I set it spinning its movement was smooth. "That's something like it anyway,..." I said. "This is one hell of a machine, by the way. I'm used to something a bit slower."

There was an older chap sitting beside me. He wore a tweed jacket with a fine assortment of pens in his top pocket - the chief engineer. He was looking over my shoulder. "Brilliant," he said.

Pimply Nose couldn't see from his seat but didn't seem interested in moving to have a look. "So how old are you then, Mr Morton?" he asked.

There was an almost audible collective intake of breath. Unfortunately, as I was discovering, ageism is a fact of life, but it wasn't very smart of him to broadcast it.

"I'm forty-two," I said.

There was no response. I'd had a good run, but now I guessed

things were about to fall apart. Pony tail looked at me with the eyes of someone who might enjoy watching people jump to his command and I realised my father was right. I had years on him. I'd think about myself, I'd turn around and tell him to fuck off, and he knew it. He blinked and looked down at his notes, trying to gather his thoughts. Then, as if he'd willed it, the door opened and the blonde receptionist came in. With a little sideways look at me, she went up to him and whispered something in his ear. He was cool. He just nodded and said thank-you. Then he looked at me again, this time with a certain smugness. "I'm sorry but what was your name again?"

"Norton," I said, emphasising the N. "Tom N-orton."

"It's just that a Mr Morton's phoned to say he can't make the interview."

"Well, like I said, I'm Tom N-orton. I,... em... called in to see if there was any work going. I'm due to be made redundant at the end of the year. I must admit, I was a little surprised to find myself in an interview so soon."

The pony tail smiled, a crocodile sort of smile. Pimply Nose looked smug and the engineer laughed. Rachel blushed and looked at me, her eyes widening. Then Pony Tail looked at her, his eyes fastened on the side of her head, his lips pursed in frustration. "Ms Standish," he said. "What ever's going on?"

It's strange, how events can suddenly trigger memories of other events, memories we're not aware of having kept. There had been a time at school when another man had looked at her like that. He was without doubt the most ferocious maths teacher I have ever encountered, one who greeted any lack of understanding with complete intolerance and brutal sarcasm.

I recall Rachel had been sitting a few rows back from me and the teacher, a big, hairy chap with mutton chop whiskers, had hurled a question at her. She hadn't known the answer and I'd felt her silence then, as I felt it now. I'd tried to will the words into her mind so she might escape his wrath,... but it hadn't worked.

"Miss Standish," the teacher had said, his mouth curling in feigned contempt. "You are a foolish and irresponsible young woman." I'd focused my eyes upon him then, as I focused them upon Pony Tail now, and I burned a hole clean through his head. I felt the same way, exactly,.. the same smouldering rage, and all on behalf of someone who did not know me. It was astonishing, and

frightening to know I could still feel that way about anything.

"This is my fault," I said. "I'm sorry,..."

"Hell of a coincidence," said the engineer. "But anyway, I don't see the problem." He turned back to the computer screen and tapped at it with one of his pens. "How quickly could you create a mould tool from that, then?"

"Oh about ten minutes," I said. "You could have it e-mailed to your toolmaker anywhere in the world within an hour and be cutting metal in the morning."

"Get away!"

But the others weren't listening any more. Pony Tail was clicking his pen on and off. "There is a certain protocol we must follow," he explained, "If you'd like to submit a CV, I'm sure we'd be happy to,..."

"Bollocks," said the engineer, who then immediately apologised to Rachel. "Look, this is the first bloke we've had in here today who can do more than switch this bloody thing on - the only one who's had any idea what it is we make!"

But Pony Tail wasn't impressed. "We have an obligation to the bona-fide applicants," he said.

"There's nowt to writing out an application form," said the engineer. "We can do that now. I'll get one from reception."

I stood up. "No, look. I've made a mistake. I'll be on my way, if it's all the same."

"Rubbish, sit down, lad. Have a cup of tea or summat. We can soon sort this out."

But Pony Tail preferred the former option. "Ms Standish,.... if you'd escort Mr. N-orton off the premises, please."

Rachel stood and made for the door. I felt wretched,... not so much for my own embarrassment, which was growing by the second, but more because I felt through my actions I had lowered her reputation in their unworthy eyes. Before I left, with one click of the mouse, I trashed the computer model of the bottle. It was childish, but there was no way they were having it.

"I'm sorry to have wasted your time, gentlemen."

She was waiting in the corridor. She looked hot and flustered. "I'm so sorry," she said. "You must think I'm an idiot."

"No,... Rachel! God no,.... It was my fault entirely. I should have stopped you sooner,... I just thought,.... Well, I don't know. It was stupid of me."

She paused in reception and pulled some papers from behind the desk.

"If you'd like to fill one in and drop it off,..."

It was an application form. "Actually, I don't think I'll bother," I said.

"But you must!"

"I've caused you enough trouble."

She pressed the form on me, so I took it and folded it carefully, a slow precision fold which bought me time, time I used to look at her once more, perhaps I thought for the last time. Then her brow twitched and she seemed to remember something from a former life, a life beyond Bexley's Bottles and the fen-lands of Cambridgeshire,...

"Do I know you?" she asked.

At once I felt the floor become unsteady, as if the carpet had been laid on water. "We were in the same year at school," I replied. Then I held out my hand to her. "I'll be on my way, Rachel. It's been,... lovely,... seeing you again after all this time. You really haven't changed at all. You're exactly as I remember you."

My hand was shaking, my heart pounding so much I was sure she could hear it. Slowly then, she reached out and sealed her fingers around mine,... pressing gently and regarding me closely while she searched her memory. For the first time, I felt her flesh. It was cool and firm.

And her touch changed me.

"Tom? Tom Norton? Yes I do remember now. Of course. It's such a long time ago, isn't it. How are you?"

"Oh,... fine."

I was elated. She remembered me. Remembered my name. Or was she simply being polite? I was weakening, her every word innocently chipping away at my remaining strength. I wasn't sure how much more I could take, without sitting down. "And you?" I asked.

She paused as if to weigh up her current life. "Okay," she said.

I fancied I could feel myself growing faint. "Perhaps,.... we could catch up some time," I suggested - so easily done I could not believe I'd said it. Then I watched her, scrutinised her every move, every beat of her lids, every twitch of her mouth. And sure enough, the eyes slid slowly away. There was a little sideways movement of her head, not quite a shake, but it was enough to disembowel me. The

blow was none the less painful for having seen it coming, nor indeed for having anticipated it for the best part of twenty five years.

It was a strangely charged moment,... devastating and yet I realised it was a triumph as well, a glimmer of sunshine warming the fringes of the dark clouds. I'd be okay, I thought. I'd get over this and I would be whole again - except now she was smiling.

"Actually, that would be lovely," she said. Then she handed me a card with her name on it, and her mobile number:

Ms Rachel Standish, Production Supervisor, Bexley's Bottles,...

"Call me," she said.

CHAPTER 21

I did not go directly home, but drove around aimlessly for a while, eventually heading out across the Plain of Lancashire, dusk falling as blankets of mist formed above the unfenced vastness of its meadows. I'd always thought the plain a dreary place, even under the balmiest Summer's sky, but for extra measure Autumn had brought mud and mist to the roads which criss-crossed its forlorn bareness. And its roads are narrow, a disjointed mesh of byways, forming a myriad junctions at which I seemed to pick my way with no more care than at the tossing of a coin.

Eventually, I ended up at the coast, heading along Marine Drive at Southport where I pulled over on the deserted promenade car-park. Here, the wind was shrieking, sending sand devils along the grim expanse of a muddy beach. Incredibly, amid this maelstrom I spied a girl walking her dog. She was blonde and long legged. I registered her in a certain way, as I did all women,... her bottom first, the shape of it, the way it moved, then her girth,... and finally her face. She was attractive - on a scale of one to ten, perhaps a six or a seven (ladies, forgive me).

This distraction was not without relevance, because it made me realise how differently I'd seen Rachel, not just that day, but always. With this blonde haired, long legged girl, I was driven by the simplistic male reflex, a curiosity you might say - in cruder terms, an anticipation of how pleasing it might be to sink myself into a vessel of that shape and with those particular dynamics.

The face, the eyes, the window on her soul, her character, her essential being, was of secondary importance to her disembodied sex. But with Rachel, it had always been the eyes first.

I had met her at about the same time I had awakened to the hormone fired notions of bosoms and the dark mysteries which reputedly lay above the teasing hem of a girl's skirt. There had been other girls in those days, other pleasing vessels who'd sneaked into my mind at night to bare, at least in fantasy, their feminine attributes in order to accompany the new found pleasures of self stimulation.

But Rachel had never come to me that way. She had aroused in me a sense of longing like no other, blinding in its heat and somehow all the more potent for its absence of carnal desire. As

childlike as this sounds, I had simply wanted to be with her.

The blonde haired, leggy girl battled against the wind and I speculated on how easily I might have wound down the window and called her over. Had she come, had I been twenty years younger, and had she been a somewhat racy and reckless kind of girl, she might have accepted an invitation to share a coffee, the first move in a chain of events leading up to the sinking of my sex into hers. But from the impartial vantage point of my fantasy, I could see what a cold, and rather desperate thing that would have been - no different perhaps to my evening with Carol, no different to any of my meaningless adolescent fantasies - but of course infinitely more risky.

It was a while before I realised my telephone was ringing. It was Eleanor. Already it was after seven and she wanted to know if everything was okay.

"I've seen her," was all I could say.

There was a pause then, and finally: "Come home. We'll talk about it."

So I drove, but on arriving at home I let myself in and withdrew into the quiet of my room without a word. There, I sat cross legged upon the floor and tried to meditate, like Eleanor, tried to think calmly upon all that had happened. It would have helped if she'd put on weight or gone grey and wrinkly, for then I could have said the Rachel I'd known no longer existed, but she really had appeared the same, a few creases around her eyes perhaps and maybe the skin was not as smooth, not as child like,... but it was Her and the effect was stunning.

All I could see and think of was her face.

After an hour or so, Eleanor grew impatient and came softly into my room under the pretext of bringing coffee. By now the place had become a haven of stillness, a shrine to my obsession with the goddess Rachel, her picture an icon, lit by the soft bulb from a lamp on my bedside table.

She set the coffee down and smiled uncertainly. "Everything okay?"

"Can't say for sure," I replied.

"Did you speak to her?"

"I suggested we got together sometime, to catch up."

"That's good, isn't it? What did she,... say?"

"She told me to give her a call."

"Ah!" She joined me on the floor then, tucking her feet beneath her, forming herself expertly, like a rubber woman, into the lotus. Then, noticing my own less graceful posture she said: "Here, like this. It's about placing your most sacred orifice in contact with the floor and drawing yourself up,... like so,..."

"My most sacred orifice? Ah,... right,... " I made an effort to copy her. "It's a bit uncomfortable."

"You'll get used to it. Now breathe. No. You're using just the tips of your lungs." She put her hand beneath my ribs and pressed gently. "From here," she said. "Breathe from here. Let me feel it. Yes, that's better. Now imagine yourself sinking down, to this point, here." She jabbed her finger into my stomach,... just below my navel. She told me to think of a flower, to concentrate upon it, to try to imagine it in greater and greater detail, and that if I should struggle or lose patience, then quickly think of another flower of a different shape, a different colour.

I tried all this for a while but the concept seemed ridiculous and I gave up. "I don't want to think of flowers," I said. "I want to think of the best way through this insanity."

"And you will," she soothed. "The answer will come through your subconscious, but only if your mind is still."

I tried again, thinking this time not of flowers, but of women's faces: Rachel, inevitably, and Carol and, to make the numbers up, Eleanor as well and the blonde girl half glimpsed from the beach. I imagined them before me, one at a time, their features swimming in and out of focus, but I couldn't hold onto any of them for long, except for Eleanor whose image I seemed capable of resolving even down to the detail of her lashes and the very texture of her skin.

"So when are you going to call her then?"

"I don't know,"

"You're afraid. I can understand that. But you know you have to call her."

Yes, I was afraid, afraid of what I'd uncovered, afraid of what it was inside of me that had driven me this far. And, yes, I knew I had to call her, only not now, not right away.

My evening vigils continued in solitude for days. Eleanor's technique eventually rewarded me with a measure of stillness, a sort of melancholy calm - except I'd had to reject her likeness in favour of the pretty girl from Channel Five news. Eleanor's lucidity had seemed out of keeping with the others, and proved somehow

disturbing.

Eventually, I became more rational and finally, on Friday night, I picked up the phone and dialled her number. I had half expected to hear the impersonal voice of an answering service but was shocked into silence when she answered right away - her voice so clear, so potent, just an eleven digit code away from the solitude of my childhood room.

"Hello?"

Speak, for pity's sake! Say something! "Em,... Hi, Rachel? This is Tom Norton."

"Tom! I thought you'd forgotten about me."

"Not likely," I said. "I wondered if you fancied meeting up. I thought we could have a meal or something. It would be nice, like we said, to catch up. How about this weekend?"

"I'm away this weekend."

I caught my breath. In my hypersensitive state I imagined it might even be a brush off. Was she angry because I hadn't called sooner? If I could just push this a little more, I thought, I might yet deliver my rejection! But no, instead I began a hasty retreat. "Not to worry, then. Some other time perhaps. Are you going anywhere nice?"

"Malham," she replied.

"You are? I used to go there a lot with my Dad. We'd go walking."

"Really? You know the Dunnet Arms?"

"Sure, I've stayed there a few times,... nice place. Good restaurant."

There was a pause. "Well, if you're free why don't you come?"

"Eh? But I wouldn't want to intrude, I mean,..."

"You wouldn't be intruding. I'm not with anybody if that's what you mean. I'd quite like it if you could come. In fact, I think I'd like it very much."

I felt a numbness sweeping through me. She would like it. She would like it very much if I could come! Had she really said that, I wondered, or was my mind playing tricks? Had reality and fantasy crossed over here?

"Tom?..."

"That sounds great. I'll be there," I said.

"Good. I look forward to it."

"Me too. Bye,..."

I broke the connection, then placed my forehead against the carpet and breathed out slowly. I was still numb and reluctant to make any sudden moves in case I shattered the moment, or worse: suddenly woke up to a contortion of agony when I realised I'd dreamed the whole thing. That worried me, for it was as if I still wanted her, even after all this time. It was as if I was still longing to hear her say the words from that earlier dream, the words that had haunted me all my life: that she wanted to be with me.

I reached out and touched the 'phone. I ran my fingertips over the tiny hole through which her voice had come, as if there might still be a trace of her. Then I closed my eyes as a feeling of drunkenness overcame me. I must have drifted off then, crouched over like that because the next thing I knew, Eleanor was squeezing my shoulder, shaking me gently. "Tom! Tom!"

I awoke startled, my joints locked, my muscles stiff. The 'phone was still there on the carpet. It was after midnight and Eleanor was dressed for bed, wearing only a tee-shirt, her long white legs towering above me.

"Tom. What is all this?" She helped me onto the bed. "You'll make yourself ill."

She had a point. So far, my body had served me well through the emotional ascent into adulthood, the marathon of marriage, the grind of parenthood and work, and lately I'm sure it had been preparing itself for the long coast down into the softer valleys of my later life. But, as if to spite myself for the loss of everything I'd worked for, I had suddenly injected into my very soul the most potent concoction known to man - the delirious agony of a teenager's unrequited love.

CHAPTER 22

I checked the Midget over in readiness on Saturday morning. In spite of the cold, I washed it down and gave it a polish, taking care not to burst any of the rust bubbles on the wings and the doors. Then I took furniture polish to the interior in an attempt to have it smelling like new, instead of like an old carpet after a flood.

My father looked on from the doorstep. "Why not take mine?" he said. "I don't need it this weekend - and I can always potter round in yours if I have to."

"No thanks, Dad. It's got to be the Midget."

He leaned against the door frame, arms folded. "I suppose so," he said. "You know, when I was a teenager I had a thing for a girl called Grace. She was very good looking, but I think it was the name that first drew me. You know? Gracefulness and all that? I thought she was lovely, and pure as the driven snow.

"It took me a year to pluck up the courage to ask her out." He smiled at the memory. "She told me to get lost - just like that: 'Get lost, Jack,' she said, except there was a look in her eye when she said it - sort of cold. It was like being stabbed through the chest with an icicle."

"What happened to her?"

He shrugged. "I've no idea, but I found out years later she was the biggest whore in Middleton. It was Alf Jenks who told me, but said he hadn't had the heart to let on at the time in case he hurt my feelings. Blokes seem to think we should all learn from our own mistakes don't they? Anyway, I met your mother soon after and everything worked out for the best."

"And the moral of this story?"

He smiled. "No moral, lad. Just go easy."

"No 'get laid and live a little'?"

"I'm not that daft. I know this isn't about getting laid."

He saw me off, waving from the gate in his carpet slippers. He'd never done that before, never once waved me off, nor greeted me with any more emotion than had been apparent in the welcoming tilt of his head. I held his view in the mirror for as long as I could and became aware of a strange tightness in my chest, a fog of emotion, ambiguous in its aim. It might have been for Rachel, for him, or self pity.

By half past four I was crawling east on the A59. It was thick with wagons and tea time traffic, a slow, grinding drive that set my spirits sinking. At Gisburn, I took the Settle road, the old Midget purring and clinging deftly to the twists and turns. This was more its kind of country and I began to enjoy the drive, anticipating the bends, pressing on down the long hills, judging the gears, things that seemed somehow quaint and unnecessary with a modern car.

As I penetrated deeper into the rural hinterland of Lancashire and Yorkshire, the sky became thick with gold tinted cloud, lit from beneath by a sun now slipping behind low hills. Though it was cool, I wound the windows down and let the air fill the car. I could smell the moors and I fancied I could also smell the coming of rain as the clouds deepened, eventually blotting out the pale light and hurrying the onset of darkness.

Slowly, the odometer clicked out the distance and it struck me how remote Malham was, a long drive with nothing either side of the narrow road but rolling meadows and open fell. It was a strange choice for a woman to make, and not the obvious haunt of a shallow, heartless whore. It seemed lonely somehow,... introspective, isolated, huddled down amid a protective ring of fells.

The Dunnet was a little way out of the village, a small Victorian hotel originally built to soak up the tourists who had come this way on the heels of Turner, seeking the romance of the great cove and the yawning chasm of Gordale. I'd stayed there a few times in my younger days and remembered it as a cosy, respectable place, dramatic in its setting on the edge of the wilderness.

The car-park was full,... just enough room to squeeze the Midget in. I'd brought a bag with me, thinking I'd book a room but I'd deliberately not arranged anything in advance, still harbouring a suspicion I'd imagined the whole thing and that after all, she wouldn't really be there. I decided instead to let events carry me, to prepare for nothing, to prejudge nothing.

It was a little after five thirty when I walked in. A friendly bearded chap met me at reception and at once I found myself asking him if he had a room,... thus far then it seemed I was fated to stay.

"We do indeed," he replied. "What name is it sir?"

"Em,... Norton."

"Would that be Tom Norton?"

I looked at him in surprise. Surely, he hadn't remembered me from my last visit! "That's right," I said.

"We already have you booked in Mr. Norton. You'll be joining Ms. Standish for dinner, I believe?"

"She here?" I felt a rush of blood to my head and looked around as if I expected to see her standing behind me.

"I don't believe she's checked in yet, sir."

"And Ms. Standish reserved the room?"

"That's right. Last night as I remember."

I had spent my youth worshipping Rachel at a distance, unable even to clear my throat in her presence for fear of her rejection but now, after just one telephone call and a few words, we were dining in a romantic hotel and she was reserving me a room - all be it a single room, quite small but comfortable.

I washed and shaved and changed my shirt. Then I threw on a tie before yanking it off again. I brushed my hair - one way, then the other to see which would best cover my thinning pate, then cursed myself for my vanity and for not having had it cut when Eleanor had suggested I should. I splashed on some after shave, then washed it off and finished up still with an hour to spare, meditating on the carpet, deep breathing and working through my slow slide show of faces.

I was calmer when I finally came down to dinner. I spied her right away, at one of the best tables. It was set aside from the press and the babble of other diners, half secluded in the bay of a window. The very sight of her set me quivering inside. She was gazing out into the darkness, silver earrings sparkling, dark hair, deep, dark eyes. Turning slowly, she acknowledged my approach with only the faintest widening of her lids. Then she gestured almost queen-like with an upturned palm for me to sit down.

I could not believe that after all of my life, my most productive years, the wheel could turn full circle back to Her,... that after everything, She would be waiting at this table in a blue, bare shouldered dress, greeting my arrival as if it had been the most natural thing in the world.

I could not speak. I drew out my chair and sat down without once taking my eyes from her. She matched my gaze at first, calm, steady - then broke off, her lips tightening into a thin smile.

"You came," she said.

"Of course."

"I wasn't sure if you would. On reflection, I was worried you might think me a bit - well - forward."

"Not at all."

I waited for her to speak again, buying time while my senses caught up with the reality, that I was sitting at a table only a dancing candle away from Rachel Standish.

"So," she said. "What have you been up to these past twenty five years?"

I heard myself laughing nervously. "It sounds such a long time doesn't it?"

"It is a long time."

"Sometimes it doesn't seem so long."

The sense of calm was deserting me. My hands were shaking suddenly, my fingertips trembling like the onset of disease, and my heart was thumping, cracking itself against my ribs with every dogged pulse. In an effort to compose myself once more, to fasten onto something firm, I pulled out the school photograph and slid it across the table. She smiled at it - a sad sort of smile, I thought.

"I looked so young," she said.

"But you haven't changed," I protested. "Not a bit." Then I worried I'd sounded too eager, showering her with praise like cheap perfume.

"You're very kind, but I have changed. And things have changed so much. It's odd, you know? I've never made a habit of thinking about the past, but since meeting you I've been thinking about it a lot. The world's so different now."

"Not that different, surely!"

"Think about it," she said. "When you and I were at school, they'd only just invented pocket calculators."

It was not the topic I'd imagined, a discussion on the subject of pocket calculators, but it seemed reasonable to follow her lead, and any subject was better than awkward silence. "I guess you're right. I remember doing physics in the fourth year with a slide rule. Home computers were still years away."

She became suddenly animated and for the first time I sensed that like me she was nervous too. She reached into her handbag and took out her mobile 'phone. It was the size of a matchbox, a beautiful silver shell. She laid it on the table and beside it she placed her palmtop computer, which was about the size of a purse. "Now look at us," she said.

I reached inside my jacket and produced my own 'phone, my own palmtop. "Snap," I said.

Her computer had an infra red communications port, as did mine. At a glance, I knew the two devices could exchange messages and I imagined fingering a button on mine in order to send a stream of consciousness into hers. What would it have said? I love you. Hardly a day has gone by when I haven't thought of you?

I felt it then, looking down at our trinkets, the distance between that time and now. "Life seemed so certain, didn't it?" I said. "Things would change slowly - maybe it's because we were children, I don't know. But now life just seems to be about coping with change itself. There's nothing sure, nothing certain to hold onto any more and sometimes it seems we have to run even to stand still."

She smiled, perhaps embarrassed by my sudden gloom. Then she looked at my hands. "You're married?"

It was a matter of fact sort of question, not an accusation. I gazed down at the ring. The feel of it had grown so natural over the years, I had forgotten it was there, perhaps in the same way as I had sometimes forgotten Annie was there. I turned it slowly on my finger and pulled it two thirds of the way clear before sliding it back in response to the chill I felt shooting up my arm.

"Separated," I said. "And you?"

"Divorced. A long time ago." She pushed the picture back. "Have you kept in touch with any of the others?"

"No. I bumped into Carol Conner a while ago."

Rachel blinked and drew back a fraction. "I remember Carol," she said. "I don't think she cared for me very much. I remember a skiing holiday, once. We went with the school. Were you there? Do you remember?" She sighed, then checked herself. "Well, it was a long time ago."

"I didn't go," I said, wondering if perhaps Rachel hadn't been so outrageously wanton as Carol had tried to make out. Had Carol guessed the truth, that it was me who'd had the crush on Rachel and not my fictitious friend? Had she set out deliberately to disillusion me?

"So, anyway," I said. "I'm surprised you recognised me. I had a bit more hair in those days."

"Does that bother you?" she asked. "The hair?"

I was taken aback by her openness and smiled in defence. "I suppose it does, if I'm honest - not that I try to disguise it or

anything. It's just a sign that something else is changing. That the body I'm wearing is getting older, when inside I feel the same, the same as when we were at school together."

"Well," she said. "I wouldn't worry about the hair. There are worse things that can happen to a man. And you look in good shape to me." She gave a sigh. "I've been thinking about you, Tom,... since we met. I do remember your face quite clearly now. You were always very quiet, very reserved. I know we shared some classes, didn't we?"

The fact she remembered so little meant of course that it was true, what I had always known, that she had not secretly longed for me in the way I had longed for her. But there was no sense of release in knowing it, not now. I had to push for more. Push harder.

"We shared chemistry, and physics," I said. "You were good at physics and you were in my form in the last year."

"Was I?"

She smiled then, causing her cheeks to dimple. And the dimpling of those cheeks triggered more memories of stolen glances from across the classroom. I had torn away the overlying dross of the intervening decades and was experiencing anew every subtle emotion she had once so innocently sparked in me.

She blushed suddenly. "You must think me very brazen. Us just meeting up like that and then me inviting you here."

"I don't remember you as the brazen type."

"I'm surprised you remembered me at all."

"I could never have forgotten you," I said.

Of course she was intrigued by that. "Oh?"

I had not meant to say it and realised at once I had driven myself into a corner. There was only one way out. I gathered a long, slow lung-full of air, then exhaled through pursed lips as I summoned my nerve. "I had a bit of a crush on you actually." There! It was out. Simple! I had taken even myself by surprise.

She became very still, her eyes wide but unreadable. "You did?"

It pained me then to make light of it, but I did not want to frighten her. "We were just kids. It was a long time ago."

She sucked in her lips and turned away for a moment as if unable to meet my gaze. "Tom, I'm so sorry," she said and her genuine distress was alarming to see.

"Don't," I said. "If I'd had anything about me at the time, I should have just asked you out."

"Why didn't you?"

"Shyness, I suppose. Like you said, I was quiet. And I've always been hopeless with girls."

She tightened her face into the gentlest of smiles while I burned with a mixture of embarrassment and regret and I was glad when at last the waitress stepped up with her pad.

We ordered dinner. Rachel chose the wine, an expensive and informed choice that unnerved me a little because I've always been clueless in matters of taste and fashion. And later, while we ate, a companionable silence settled between us, allowing me time to breathe, time to think ahead.

She had matured into a very beautiful woman, the fullest bloom of her being. The girl I had known so long ago had been but the first bud, the first hint at the magnificence that might follow. It seemed I could talk to her and indeed the real Rachel was undoubtedly charming and winning and all those things good men desire in a woman, but the old goddess remained on her shoulder, watching my every move. Not one scrap of Her power had been diminished with time.

Eventually, the silence dissolved into tame conversation. She told me how she had worked her way up from the bottle line at Bexley's to become the production supervisor. It was well paid, and in talking about it, she seemed to pull the job over her like a coat and she became, for a while, the voice of Bexley's Bottles.

"Have you considered it yet?" she asked. "I mean the job. I'm serious. Why don't you apply? I can't say for sure of course, but I reckon it's yours if you want it."

"That wasn't the impression I came away with."

"Oh, you mustn't worry about that. Jefferson - he's the GM, the one with the pony tail, do you remember? Well, he's all right really. He's a bit young, that's all. Frank and me - Frank's the chief engineer - we had a word with him when you'd gone - more coffee? Anyway, I realised I didn't have your number or anything - no way to get in touch, so you can imagine my relief when you called."

And slowly then, a little of the truth began to dawn. Not only had I been blinded by my feelings for her, but also by the fact that she was a woman. Had she been a man, then I would have recognised this for what it was - the room, the meal: it was a seduction of sorts, but I was not sitting there with Rachel Standish. I was being wined and dined by the Production Supervisor of Bexley's

Bottles. The whole thing would be charged to the company.

Was I merely being head-hunted?

I felt a chill as all of this dawned on me. I felt the romance of it become rigid and brittle and finally it fell into little jagged pieces at my feet. I looked at her while my insides collapsed with disappointment. Had she really remembered me, I wondered, or had that been no more than a clever device, because Bexley's were desperate for a safe pair of hands to guide them with a technology they knew nothing about?

She was near enough for me to reach out and stroke her cheek. We had shared a meal, we had spoken of old times, I had even told her that I had once loved her - for a crush is just another word for love - and still she could not see me. The goddess upon her shoulder was laughing.

"So, Tom. What do you say?"

I almost hated her then and I felt a great darkness consuming me. The goddess had grown ugly and cold and I scrabbled in the darkness, among the shards of obliterated romance, for the sharpest weapon I could find. And then I thrust it at her without a care.

"Rachel, this is all very nice, very flattering. But I don't think so."

She looked down, subdued for a moment. "No need to make a decision right away. But please, you must think about it."

I had already thought about it. I had fantasised every day about sliding into that job, so I might see her again, as I had once seen her. And at this rate it would not have taken long for our old roles to have been restored: me the silent worshipper and she the love I could never have. But that would have been a return to the past and not much of a reckoning.

I knew by now that even if I were out of work for the rest of my life and with Bexley's banging on my door every day, offering me my weight in gold, I could never have sunk myself again into her careless proximity.

"Okay, I'll think about it," I said.

"Good. Now look. There's no need to worry about driving back. There's a room booked for you,... it's all on the firm, so why not stay? Would you like a night cap?"

I was tired, my disappointment weighing upon me, but I agreed. I'd feel better in the morning I thought and perhaps there was still a chance of bringing things back onto a more personal footing, still a chance of nurturing a meaningful rejection, now we'd got the head-

hunting business out of the way.

Rachel called the waitress over with little more than a twinkle of her eye. And then she turned to me again. "So," she said. "Have you thought what you'll do tomorrow?"

"Could we share breakfast?" I asked, tempting just such a rejection.

She smiled in faint surprise. "Well, naturally."

"And lunch? Can I buy you lunch?"

"Okay. I was going to see Gordale Scar. Come with me?"

This wasn't working. She was supposed to say no but she kept saying yes, kept drawing me in, but she was so matter of fact about it, there was no hint that she took my request in anything other than a friendly way - no romance, no recognition of the way I had once felt about her, except...

Suddenly I caught her looking at me. It was a particular look, an obvious though involuntary dilation of her pupils and a faint tightening of the lines around her eyes. It had the effect of triggering in me an image of her laid upon a bed. Incredibly, she was naked, her legs spread wide for me and she was very beautiful. I saw her breasts, I saw her mound rising in invitation. But this was not merely a prurient interlude, a crude undressing of a woman with my eyes. Indeed her nudity, stunning though it appeared, at least in my mind, filled me with a sudden and quite terrible dread. I was confused at first and then realised what it was: I could not think of penetrating her; I could not think of running my hands over her, nor savouring the imagined heat and taste of her body. For that she would have to become merely a woman. Merely human!

"Tom?"

"I'm sorry. I've just remembered something. It's not important." I decided then it was all pointless, unless I could leave her in no doubt that penetration, so to speak, was exactly what I wanted, just so she could leave me in no doubt where I stood. "Another drink perhaps?" I suggested.

"Of course. Let's go through to the lounge."

She moved well, I thought. And she fitted her dress perfectly, a lovely shape moving ahead, her aura washing through me in long luxurious waves. The lounge was deserted, everyone having been sucked into the bar. She chose a quiet corner and we ordered whiskies from the waiter.

"It's really good seeing you," I said. "I know we've both been through so much. Everything I've worked for seems to have been swept aside suddenly. I don't mind telling you, I was feeling a bit lost, not knowing what to do, unable to just let it all go and start again. But now, meeting up with you again like this, it sort of draws a line under things."

"You have to move on," she said. "Come and work with me. It's perfect. Don't you believe in fate? You just turning up like that, when we were interviewing, looking for someone to do what you've been doing for years?"

"Fate? No. I'm not sure I believe in fate any more."

"Well, a fortunate coincidence then."

I swallowed back a feeling of guilt. How would she have felt if she'd known the truth, that I'd been hunting her down for weeks?

"I don't know," I said.

"Look, Tom, I understand. You've been at Derby's since you left school and it's hard to think of things changing. But they do. And good jobs are hard to come by, especially when you get to - well - to our age. Your only alternative would be some low paid job stocking shelves in a supermarket or something, and that would be such a waste of your experience, your talents."

"But everything's telling me the old ways are going, that my experience is irrelevant now. How soon before Bexleys switches bottle production to Taiwan? Then all you'll have is a posh head office in Norwich and another derelict shed up north, a bunch of managers and salesmen running about and a load of redundant engineers and operators."

I'd surprised her with this one. "We've always managed to remain competitive" she said.

"I'm sorry. I was just thinking out loud. I'm sure you'll be okay." But we were drifting away from the subject closest to my heart, so I took a deep breath and dived in. "I was wondering," I said. "Please don't think me rude, but are you seeing anyone at the moment?"

She smiled defensively, wrong footed and more than a little dazed by my directness.

"It's none of my business, I know,..."

"I'm not seeing anyone," she said and then, perhaps more significantly. "But I don't date much. It's just not my thing these days."

My heart, already erratic enough, skipped in anticipation. This

was good, I thought! She did not date. It was not her thing. "Ah, right."

Again the smile and a quizzical shake of the head. "And you?"

"Er, well, not really. I've not thought about it much." And it seemed I was not lying, for in the blaze of her presence, I had forgotten about Carol which suggested that for all our sexual athletics, she meant very little - something I was not proud of. "I'm still getting used to the idea of being separated. But I was just wondering, would you consider... "

It had been rashly done, blurted out like the ramblings of a drunkard, but she was not fazed. She was too calm, too experienced perhaps. How many men must have asked her this? She took a moment to absorb my words, while I squirmed in embarrassment. "What is it Tom?"

I backed off as if I'd been scalded. "It's okay," I said. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking..."

"Do you want us to go upstairs or something?"

I felt a white heat sear my face. It was so intense I was sure it would singe my eyebrows. "What? No! Nothing like that!"

So much for making her believe I wanted only sex.

She was puzzled. "Then what?"

"Just - well - I was wondering if you'd go out with me."

She looked at me as if I had spoken in a foreign language. "Go out with you?"

"Yes."

"You mean like to the movies and walks on the beach and holding hands and that sort of thing?"

"I'm sorry." I held up my hands in defeat, but put them down again when I realised how much they were still shaking. "You're supposed to tell me I'm a nice bloke but that you can't think of me in that way, that you don't date."

"Well, you are a nice bloke, Tom."

"Thanks. I asked for that."

So there it was. I actually felt the earth move as if a great slow wave had passed beneath us. And how was it for me? I felt stupid. She was still looking at me and I pretended that the look she was giving me didn't matter any more, that I was free, that I could breathe again, that I had pushed her into rejecting me, pushed her into releasing me from a bond that was entirely of my own making. But as the room steadied, I realised that nothing significant had

changed, and all I had really learned, after twenty five years, after the passing of a generation, was that the slightest gesture of her head, of her hands, still moved me. She could flex her fingers and my heart would ache. She could smile and I would feel my insides twisting.

"But actually," she went on. "What I said was that I don't date much. That's all."

"Em..."

"And we're already having a sort of date. Aren't we?"

"But this is different..."

"What about tomorrow, then?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Is that not a date?"

"I suppose so."

She leaned closer and chinked her glass against mine. "How can spell it out? Yes, Tom. It would be nice to go out with you. In fact it sounds lovely. Thank you."

I'd been tense all evening, scrunching up my shoulders, slowing down the supply of blood to my head. Now, it seemed to stop altogether and I had the impression of losing my peripheral vision, being aware only of her face. This was more than just a trick of my mind and suddenly I sensed there was a very real danger of losing consciousness: I was going to faint.

"Em, would you excuse me for a moment?"

I found my way out with a reasonable level of dignity, but the walls were bright with flashing lights and they were closing in as my vision became more erratic and my brain switched off in shock. I made it outside where a ferocious blast of moorland air made a brief attempt at reviving me. Then I sat upon the step and placed my head between my knees. I think in fact I did black out for a moment, or at best I barely hung on, not daring to move while my head swam and my vision blurred out completely. When I came to my senses I was sweating and shivering in the biting cold.

I thought about Carol then, something she'd said about teenagers and not being ready at such a tender age for the rigours of adulthood. But the opposite is also true. The vessel we become as adults has too weak a lining to bear the undiluted acid of a teenager's emotion. There's nothing sophisticated about growing up, about becoming an adult. The trick of the adult is simply that we learn to cope by shutting down the parts of us most sensitive to

damage. But that evening as I shivered in a thin film of sweat outside the Dunnet Arms, it was impossible to ignore the searing heat that had burst the walls of its prison inside of me and was now flooding every fibre of my being.

She had pinned me at a point in my life where I had not intended staying for long, and in so doing had made me realise what should have been obvious every day of these past twenty five years: that the boy I'd once been had loved Rachel Standish with all his heart and all his soul, but more that that, there had been no process of healing at all.

I had never stopped loving her.

CHAPTER 23

She did not invite me to her room and I was glad. We bade each other good night and parted on the landing at around eleven with little more than a smile and a wave. We seemed on good terms and had I not been weighed down with so much foreboding, I might have cherished the thought of the coming day, the day I would spend with Rachel.

But as I lay alone, a million miles from sleep, I could not see how any of this would ever work. She knew nothing of my feelings. She knew no more of me than in the days when my only reality had been to gaze upon the back of her head as we'd studied the legacies of Newton and Galileo amid dark-wood labs and the smell of Bunsen burners. And how could she ever hope to know me? The person I had been, the youth, was gone and only in my wildest dreams were she and I the same.

I sought breakfast bleary eyed. We had agreed to meet in the lounge at eight thirty but she wasn't there.

"A message from Ms. Standish, sir," came a voice. It was the owner, the bearded gent from the night before.

"Oh?"

"Her apologies but she had to check out early. She left you this note."

"Note?"

I sat down to breakfast and tore open the envelope. There was a piece of Dunnet Arms note paper inside and a brief message. It was her handwriting I noticed first, and it shocked me that I should have known it. I remembered now stolen glances at her notes in those dark-wood labs, the memories coming back to me in flashes, and as always they were startling in their clarity, in their detail,... more than was surely normal. There were people I had worked alongside every day for twenty years, people who had gone from me now, died or retired to their sheds and whose names I could no longer bring to mind. So it seemed impossible to me that I could recognise the small and delicately ordered flow of a girl's hand from across such an immense void.

Tom,

I'm Sorry. I've had to go. My pager went off last night. A meeting has been called at Bexleys for eight thirty this morning. The bill's settled, so

don't worry. I'll call you. I owe you a walk down a beach somewhere.... and soon. I promise,...

Rachel.

Rachel! A simple enough word. Two syllables, seven letters, beginning with 'R', but a word that had been an assassin's blade against my chest for most of my life, a blade thrust inward a fraction at every mention, a nagging reminder of the hopeless dreams to which we are all prone.

Rachel - stab!

Rachel, Rachel - stab-stab!

Was it true, I wondered? Would she call? Or had I made a fool of myself and now she was avoiding me? She had rejected me perhaps, but like everything about this mad affair, I could not be certain. Then the waitress came up and asked if I would like my eggs scrambled or fried.

"Scrambled," I replied. "Thoroughly scrambled."

There was a cold wind blowing from the fells, a steady, unrelenting press of icy air. There was the bite of winter in it, but at least it was dry and the Midget fired up eagerly. She had not seen the car, had not been able to judge the substance of my spirit from it. It was as well, I thought, for in the cold light of day, the poor little thing seemed ever more fragile and shabby. My father was right. I should have kept the Rover with its good ride, its electronic ignition and its air-conditioning - a contemporary voice. The Midget spoke only of old dreams, of youth, of days when my life's ambition had amounted to nothing more than to fall in love, and have that love returned.

I threaded the car down the narrow lane and over the hill, to Gordale, and as I drove, I felt a change inside of me. It was like a slow focusing of emotion and of thought, and with it came an awareness that I was perhaps reaching the end of my journey. I had travelled back in time, and I was looking out at the world from the treacherous landscape of my middle teens.

It came to me then that I had not chosen the course of my life at all. I had not stood at a cross-roads, as I had imagined, and made a conscious choice of direction. Rather, I had drifted while still drunk on thoughts of her and as the currents carried me, I had imagined my every move being made as if in a scene from a film with the caption: what would she be thinking if she could see me now? Would she be more inclined to love me?

Slowly, I had been sucked into the world of work, a world revolving around Derby's, my life changing shape by imperceptible degrees until She had become just one piece of the foundation on which everything else was built. I had not stopped thinking of her, but my world had become filled with the curvaceous bottoms of regal secretaries and the filthy chatter of girls on the assembly line. Indeed, suddenly there had been a chorus line of girls, baring their milky breasts and shouting: "Look at me, Tom. Look at me!"

Would I have done anything else if She had loved me? Would I have been pulled into a different orbit? I couldn't see how. My talents were already established when I had met her, my skill with a chisel-edged pencil, my ability to form a three dimensional shape in my mind from a jumble of flattened views. Derby's cannon had already been primed and aimed in my direction. In that respect She was entirely blameless.

So, I asked myself, what now?

Few of us can face the future and know with certainty the way ahead, and in the absence of certainty, it takes courage to pick a course from a handful of choices, each one looking the same. There are those who will say one must choose the path that feels right, regardless of logic, but it seems to me as if that's just another way of doing what most of us do anyway and that's go with the flow.

I supposed that was all I could do again. I had to simply push myself out into the current and see where it took me. But my journey had thus far been such a profoundly moving experience, I had been expecting some equally profound revelation at the end of it, as if for my endeavours I would be rewarded with a deeper understanding of my life. Anything else seemed like a ridiculous anticlimax.

I parked by the roadside and followed a little path along a valley that cut deep into the open fell side. The scene was bleak, the wind cold and buffeting as I made my way into the ever narrowing gorge. Finally I turned sharp right around a pillar of weathered limestone to find myself suddenly and dramatically drawn into the scar.

It was stupendous, like stepping out of mundane reality and into the weird landscape of a fevered imagination. Gordale is a vast chasm, the limestone cliffs rising hundreds of feet and overhanging, dripping water upon the boulder strewn floor of the gorge. And before me was a wall of rock bursting with white water, with energy, the earth and the air vibrating with an intimidating roar.

I approached timidly and looked up at the tumbled wall over which the water burst. There is a climb, in the thick of the fall, into a higher chamber, more mad roaring water. I had scrambled up it once, with my father, years ago. Now, the upper chamber seemed to beckon, but all I could do was stand paralysed by the roar of the water as it spurted from every corner of the rock. I could see no way up. Then I spotted a man picking his way carefully over the last few boulders near the top. He paused and looked down.

I felt a moment of confusion. "Dad?" But it was just some crusty old geezer out for a walk. I waved and he responded with a tilt of his head before disappearing into the noise and vapour of the upper chamber.

There comes a point though when your brain tires of making sense of things, a point when it says: 'for fuck's sake'. I felt it then and chided myself, told myself to bloody well get a grip on things and sort my life out. Get a grip! How many times had my mother said that to my father in the depths of his despair? "For goodness sake, Jack. Get a grip will you?" But it had been futile and I understood now that certain forms of madness must take their course, that no amount of interference from our conscious minds, nor the straight jacket of prescribed medicine makes a jot of difference. There is a cycle, a slow working out of these things.

I drove home slowly, feeling drained and disappointed. I would have to sleep soon, or surely Eleanor was right and it would make me ill. I thought about the kids, what I should get them for Christmas - wondered for a moment if I was allowed to get them anything, or if that was Alistair's place now. It was stupid, but I really didn't know - so far away from reality I'd been pushed.

I thought of Annie then and wondered if she hated me so much, or if she'd just grown cold. And it horrified me the realisation that all the years we had been together I had never loved her, never known a moment of love. And Carol? There seemed a certain pragmatic desperation in our affair - two middle aged romantics, battening down the hatches and fixing to endure a storm in the comfort of a stranger's arms, if only because it's marginally better, I imagine, to drown in the embrace of another, than to drown alone.

Metaphor, metaphor. I saw them everywhere that day until I began to wonder if it was the last resort of a soul on the verge of surrender, to seek meaning in the aerodynamic wash of mud splattered wagons and to read significance into the spontaneous

waves of lone pedestrians from the tops of motorway bridges. I thought I was overdoing it when I finally arrived home to find a car blocking my usual spot outside my father's house. Blocking, obstructing, impeding,... a stranger! But no, this was no stranger, at least not quite. It was my uncle Eric.

Eric? I hadn't seen him for years.

He was standing in the doorway when I approached, a tall dour looking chap in his middle seventies with a full head of snowy hair. The last time we'd met had been the day of my father's marriage to Eleanor. I'd gone round to his house to persuade him to come, knowing it would have meant a lot to my father. But his last words to me had been that he thought my father was bonkers and wanted nothing to do with it. I still burned with resentment every time I thought of it. The same went for the rest of my family - my aunts, my uncles, the jolly souls who'd bounced me on their knees as a child and produced their shiny coins for ice-cream treats - all of them suddenly grown old and cold, and angry.

They'd kept their distance since the wedding, perhaps embarrassed, perhaps still spiteful, so his visit today was even more puzzling until I read it in his eyes,... read it before he'd even opened his mouth, read it in the grey stillness that seemed to hang over the house, the street, the town.

"Hello Uncle."

He looked solemn and uncomfortable and there was the vacant stare of a profound shock still in his eyes. He placed his hand on my shoulder. "It's your dad," he whispered.

CHAPTER 24

We exchanged only a few words and my memory of them is vague. My father had suffered a stroke in the early hours of that morning. He was in hospital. Eleanor was with him. It was bad. I particularly remember Eric saying that as we drove over to the hospital and how he thought I should prepare myself for the worst.

We found Eleanor by chance, wandering the sterile corridors. She seemed almost transparent, shuffling slowly as if sleepwalking.

"Eleanor?"

She looked up in a daze at the sound of my voice, then homed in on me, shuffling slowly but surely in my direction like a zombie. Then she draped her arms around my neck and I knew it was too late.

"He's gone," she said. Then after a moment: "They say it's all right to see him. I'll take you."

I didn't want to.

"It might be better," she said. "You should see him, Tom."

"No."

My uncle graced Eleanor with only the most cursory of glances then went off alone. We took a seat together and remained for a while, staring at the floor.

"What happened?"

"It was this morning," she said. "I thought he was having a lie in. It must have been in his sleep."

"Did he say anything?"

"No. He never came round." For a moment, her daze seemed to crystallise into something more tangible and terrible. She stared ahead, wide eyed and held her hands to her face. "Oh God, Tom. Oh God!"

She was shaken, and looked even paler than usual - if that was possible. Her hands trembled - I saw how she had to keep them clasped together and I remember fearing that this was something that might break her - and I needed her to be strong, strong for both of us, because only Eleanor could get me through this. Only Eleanor could bridge the void that had suddenly opened up.

It was not the first time either of us had passed this way – death I mean - but it did not lessen the sense of having all the pieces of our lives suddenly scattered at our feet. And there were so many

pieces, the task of picking them up one by one seemed too great even to contemplate. In the beginning and for a long time, I refused to believe he was gone. I should have taken Eleanor's advice, and seen him instead of sitting there, numb with shock, afraid to admit for even a second that any of it might be true.

I knew the pieces would never go back as before. Sure, they would go back somehow, eventually, but in a different order because so much of who we are depends upon the people in our lives: my mother, my father, my children, Annie, Eleanor... Rachel... all of them, a strange brew, the essence of my life. Some I could touch, some were only memories. And if one was taken from life to be transferred into memory, all the others had to shuffle round to make up the difference.

Eleanor had gone to the ladies room to splash her face with water. I was alone, gazing at the flecked patterns on the floor tiles, when suddenly, intruding into my reverie came a pair of shoes, brown brogues, a little muddy and in want of polish. I looked up to see Eric leaning over me. He cleared his throat.

"Why not come and stay with us, Tom? I mean - until - well, you know - things are settled, like."

"Thanks, Uncle but I'm fine. It's Eleanor I'm worried about. She'll need someone."

"Hasn't she got a brother or something?"

"Sure," I said. "Phil. I'd better call him, let him know."

"Yes. That would be best. If she went. I mean, to stay with her brother."

"Well, I wasn't thinking that."

"No, but it would be best, wouldn't it? I mean, like..."

Best? Best? He was driving at something, always driving at something and in his pompous way always making a mess of things. Was he nervous about me and Eleanor staying in the same house, alone, together? Did it disturb his sense of propriety? If that had been all then I might simply have told him not to worry, but I sensed there was more.

"What is it, Uncle?"

We spied Eleanor shuffling towards us again and Eric gave my shoulder a parting squeeze. "Never mind. We'll talk later, Tom."

"Sure. But we'll be fine. Thanks."

We buried my father because Eleanor thought he might want to be with my mum, in the same grave. I wasn't so sure, but in the end

I didn't see how it mattered. After all wherever he was, wherever we went to when we died, it was not to sit in some hole in the ground.

I'd like to think he was climbing Gordale Scar, or hurling bits of coal at baton wielding bobbies, and then writing about it in his memoirs. But in none of those activities did I see him hand in hand with my mother, who had always been more at home with her knitting and her Coronation Street, tut-tutting at his eccentricities. He was alone, always alone in his deeds and in his thoughts, as I supposed in the end I would be also.

They all turned up for the funeral, a huddle of poisonous black and grey suits and dresses, gathered around that pitiful hole, amid a jumble of cockeyed and pitiful headstones. I hadn't been back to the parish church at Middleton since my mother had died, twenty years ago. And as we stood there, I remembered coming as a child, sitting through Sunday school, sitting through services in the ornate Victorian church believing in my innocence that since it was God's house he must have lived through the door behind the choir stalls, and why did he never come out to take the service?

For all that early indoctrination, I was left with no sense of certainty that my mother or my father had actually passed on to another place. In fact, I was left merely empty in the knowledge that I had lost them, as surely as one might lose an essential part of you, like an arm or a leg.

The vicar was drawing it all to a close when everyone jumped out of their skins at the thunderous passing of an express train, conspicuous in its red livery - the track ran along an embankment barely fifty yards from where we stood. I suppose it would have been too much to ask that they should have painted it black for the day, or had it pass by more slowly. The vicar ploughed on bravely, but his words were lost in the dreadful din.

Life goes on, I thought.

I looked up at the train as it rattled full pelt and I wondered what the lazy eyed passengers would think as they gazed down from their seats, upon our little gathering, our little drama, lost in the clamour of their world. Eleanor was hanging from my arm, hanging close as if she feared the others would block her out if she dared to let go.

"How awful," she whispered. "We shouldn't have brought him here. There must be better places than this."

I could feel the ground shaking, like at the waterfall in Gordale, a terrific wave of energy passing beneath us.

"It'll stop him nodding off of an afternoon, that's for sure," I said, which made her snort with laughter, a gesture quick to draw daggers from the others.

"It makes no difference," I told her. "He's not here. I don't know where he is and maybe all that's left of him is what we carry in our heads. But he's not here Eleanor."

We hung together on the way back, during the long slow drive in the black taxi. Eric and Aunt Hilda, a small shrivelled woman, sat opposite, both of them mute but I read discomfort in their eyes. They had not accepted Eleanor as anything other than - as Eleanor had once indelicately put it - an old man's whore. They had not taken time to understand things in greater depth, thinking that by their prejudice they were somehow protecting him. They had known little of the insult and the hurt they had caused these past years, the last few years of his life and I could not forgive any of them for it.

It was an equally forlorn little gathering in the function room of the Dun Bull - fresh salmon and cucumber on finger tea-cakes - the taste of death, of someone's passing, and the whole room was hung over by a pall of wretched cigarette smoke. It was Aunt Hilda's idea. My Dad had never been in the Dun Bull in his life but she said it was the proper thing to do - emphasis on the word proper with a glance at Eleanor. But Eleanor had been vacant with shock and insensitive to such subtle slights.

At some point in the proceedings, I turned to find she was not there and I felt cold without her. She had wandered into the deserted beer garden, a windswept and rather un-welcoming patch of overgrown grass inhabited by a giant plastic tree which wore a hideous grin. There I found her propelling herself slowly back and forth on a child's swing, her lips pressed against the chain, her black clothing appearing ever more startling against the gaudy red and yellow of the seat and frame.

"I saw him, you know," I said.

She didn't look up at first, but kept on rocking herself as if for comfort. "Did you?"

"It was in the Dales."

She brightened a little. "He loved the Dales."

"He was heading up Gordale. He had that look in his eye. You

know?"

"I didn't expect him to leave us so soon, Tom."

"Me neither. I'd've given odds on him outlasting most of those crabby bastards in there."

She scolded me with a look.

"Well, they make me sick."

"They're still your family, Tom."

"Come on. I'll take you home."

"But the others."

"They haven't said a genuine word to us all morning. They'll not miss us now."

"That's because of me. You know how they feel about me. You go back in. They'll be fine when I've gone. I'll walk. It's not far."

I sensed she wanted to go, to go alone, so I let her and I watched as she strode off down the pavement, her dark coat filling out in the breeze like the sails of a tall ship, carrying her away. My father had seen in her someone special, someone who had suffered more than I could imagine. I didn't pretend to understand everything that had been between them, but I felt he'd given her more stability, more normality than she'd ever known - given her a place to be whoever she was.

It was later, having finally said my goodbyes to everyone and as I was returning to the car that Eric caught me up. I'd been avoiding his eye all day, afraid of him, of what might be on his mind. "Tom," he said pressing a card into my hand. "You'll be needing a good solicitor. Give this chap a ring."

"Thanks. But that's more or less all sorted now - me and Annie..."

"Not your divorce, Tom."

"Then what?"

"Your father's estate."

"His estate?" I was amused. It sounded so grand, when all it amounted to was a tiny terraced house, and a five year old motor.

"He wasn't badly off, you know...."

"Sure, I know. But, well, to be honest Eleanor's used this bloke called Hawksworth before. He sorted out my divorce stuff. He seems okay - we'll probably talk to him."

"You don't want to involve Eleanor," he said quickly.

Slowly, it began to dawn and I willed him with all my heart to say no more, but just to go away and leave me alone.

He pressed on. "Did Jack have a will?"

"I really don't know. It doesn't matter. Eleanor's his wife. It's all hers now, naturally."

He looked away. "Are you sure that's what he would have wanted."

"Of course."

"But what about you? You need something at the back of you right now. How long before you're out of work? Where are you going to live? What are you going to do, Tom?"

"Look, I suggest we drop this."

"You've got to think of yourself now."

"I'll be fine. I'll probably end up working in France."

"Is that certain?"

It was the first I'd heard of it to be honest, but it seemed like a good idea now, if only to divert his attention. "More or less. If I want to."

He remained unconvinced. "Promise me you'll ring this chap."

I shook my head, a little dazed, and deeply saddened that we were even discussing it. There was nothing selfish about his motives. He wasn't after a cut or anything like that. He was thinking of me, of family and it offended him, the idea of family money going to someone he'd never accept as family in a million years. I offered him my hand, trying to force a parting. "Cheers Uncle. But I'll be okay. There's a buyer interested in me and Annie's house. Once that goes through, I'll be fine for money."

"That's all debt," he said. "You'll be lucky if either of you get anything out of that."

"Bye. I'll call you."

He was right, though. All our married lives, Annie and I had paid interest on a mortgage, paid all manner of bills, bought two cars every four or five years, and generally pumped as much money back into the system as we'd earned. Taking stock of my assets now, they amounted to surprisingly little and I couldn't help feeling as if the life we'd led had amounted to nothing more than a sophisticated con. One had to survive, make it through to the higher levels of the game, stay married, keep going long enough to pay off the house. I saw that now, understood it at last but it was too late for us. Financially speaking, both Annie and I were screwed.

I was angry when I arrived back in Arkwright Street, angry with myself for not having made a better job of managing my life, angry with my pompous uncle for reminding me that for all my years of

earnest application, I had very little to show for it. And I think because of him, it felt strange then to be knocking on the door of my father's house to have Eleanor answer and let me in.

"Don't you have your key?" she asked.

I had it, but I'd not wanted to use it. This was her place now, her space, and though every room had once thundered to the sound of my infant footsteps, it felt as if it was no longer a place I could casually return to.

"I left it upstairs," I said.

The house was so quiet. I glanced at the hall table, like I'd done a million times before, all through my life, looking for a message, a letter, something that was going to guide me through to the next stage. I don't know what I was expecting now. Eleanor leaned upon it heavily and blew her nose. She'd been crying, the red rings around her eyes standing out against her white cheeks.

"How were they?" she asked.

"Fine."

"Tom?"

"No, really. They were fine."

She sighed. "I've just made coffee. Has Rachel not rung yet?"

Rachel! It was over a week since I'd seen her, but by now it seemed so long ago I felt I might easily have dreamed the whole thing. "I wasn't really expecting her to," I said. "I think she was giving me the brush off. I should be pleased. It was what I'd wanted."

"I thought she'd been called into meeting."

"That's what she said, but I don't know - anyway now's not the time to be thinking about it."

"So she's a liar as well as a tart?"

"You know what I mean. I must have come across as a bit of a prat, you know? A bit intense - I'd've done the same myself."

"No you wouldn't. You're far too polite."

"But that's what polite people do, Eleanor. They don't say 'in your dreams' or 'get lost, loser'. They say 'maybe', then make an excuse and disappear. I do it all the time."

"I'll have to remember that," she said, forcing a smile "So, anyway: you think the way ahead is clear for you, now? It's all resolved?"

"Maybe."

She looked surprised. "You've never said anything. What's your

plan?"

"I'm going to put my name down for an interview with the Paris office. Stavros thinks I have a good chance."

She didn't look so pleased as I'd thought she might. "Paris? It's a bit sudden, isn't it? When did you decide all of this?"

"Just now actually, but it seems the best way. And, knowing me, if I think about it too much, I'll probably never do it." I said it again, as if to convince myself: "Yes, it's definitely the best thing."

She turned away and drifted into the kitchen. I followed her and we both sank down at the table.

"When will you go?" she asked.

"They're interviewing next week. The job will start in the new year, if I get it."

"Will you be selling the house? I'd hoped to stay on a while."

"Eleanor, this place is yours. Everything that was my father's is yours."

She seemed confused. "Is it?" She rose then and turned her back.

"You know it is. You were legally married."

"But I might not want to live here."

"Okay. I can understand that. But I'd give it a while, just until you get over the shock. Then sell it and move somewhere else."

She ran the tap and began banging pots in the sink. "And you?" she said with uncharacteristic briskness. "What about you? I don't know if it's right any more, you being here. I mean what if I want to get married again? I'm still young, and I might you know? And what's he going to think with you hanging around all the time?"

"Who?"

"My boyfriend."

"You have a boyfriend?"

She turned impatiently and there was a fire in her eyes I had not seen before, but at the same time they seemed unfocussed as if betraying a desperate confusion.

"No, you idiot. I was just supposing."

All of this was crazy. Her not wanting to stay, me suddenly wanting to quit the country - it was shock. It was not the right time to be thinking about anything at all. I knew all of this, but even so her impatience stung, and it was a moment before I could gather myself. "I'll be in France," I said. "So it won't matter. My being here was only temporary anyway. I'll get a place over there."

"Damn it!" she cursed. "We're out of bread. I'd better get some."

"What? No. Forget the bread. Sit down. I'll go for some later."

She fixed me, wild eyed and furious, riveting me to the chair with her look.

"I SAID, I'LL GO!"

She didn't mean any of this. She was upset, screaming at me, railing against the injustice of it all, but I felt it knotting me up inside. In a moment she was gone. I heard the door slam, I heard the squeal of the gate. But she'd left her coat and her bag and I knew she hadn't gone for a loaf of bread. Ours was a peculiar relationship at the best of times but even more so now, and there were things we needed to understand, things which needed stating for the sake of clarity. I think that's what she'd been driving at, but I was too dense to see it at the time.

She returned an hour later. It was raining by now and she was soaked, her long hair hanging in rat tails, and her black mascara having run to form a Halloween mask, a strange painting - the smear of her life's tears. She looked in on me for moment, long enough to say quietly that she was sorry. Then she trotted upstairs to run a bath. She was embarrassed, but calm.

I couldn't say if that was good or not.

CHAPTER 25

Eleanor came down from her bath, wearing a white towelling robe and stripped of her usual black paint. It came as a shock to see her like that, not so Gothic,... more like a pale model from a T.V. advert for shampoo.

"You look much better," I said.

"I feel awful. I'm sorry I shouted. It wasn't you I was angry with."

"I know. Things are difficult. But we're okay, aren't we? You're my best friend, Eleanor."

She pressed my hand, then sat down by the fire. "I wouldn't wish a friend like me on anyone," she said.

"You're too hard on yourself."

"Did Eric get around to speaking his mind when I wasn't there?"

"You knew about that?"

"He's been wearing it like a hair shirt all week."

"Well, he mentioned a few things about the house and such. I reckon we should see your solicitor right away."

"As bad as that is it? "

"Nothing you need worry about. "

She gave a wry smile, then began to comb out her hair. It was like a great black curtain and it seemed to absorb all the light in the room.

"Perhaps it's better if I just move on," she said. "You know, move out. I know what Eric and the rest of them are thinking. Who gets the house, the car, the money? They can cause a lot of trouble, a lot of upset and I don't want that. It simply isn't worth it, Tom."

"Eleanor, the only person who can gain anything here is me. And I'm not going to go against what Dad would have wanted. We'll see Hawksworth together."

"I'd rather just melt away quietly, if it's all the same."

"But I don't want you to melt away. You can't."

"Give me a reason why I shouldn't. "

"You're,... family."

"No. I'm just some sad creature your father brought in out of the rain and married out of pity."

"That's rubbish. You know it is. He was a mess before you came. The house was falling apart. You held him together."

"He just needed someone," she said. "Of course it helped that I

could cook and sew - he was hopeless with all that."

"Like me then. "

"Oh, you're not so bad - at least you know where the kitchen is. It sounds as if he had the better end of the bargain doesn't it? I mean, what did I get? A roof, a bed? But believe me, Tom, he gave me more than I've ever had before. He gave me a reason to live, a reason for simply being. "

"Then why throw everything away that you've built here? He wouldn't have wanted that. And I don't want it either."

"Does it make any difference to you what I do or where I go? You'll be in France. We'd never see each other."

"We could write. "

She thought for a while, her eyebrows knitted together with intense contemplation of something unpleasant. "Are you really set on going? I don't think you should go, Tom. Really I don't. It feels wrong."

"You're thinking I can't survive over there?"

"It worries me that there'd be no one looking after you."

"I'll find myself a nice French lady."

But who would be looking after Eleanor, I thought? There was always Phil, but the last we'd heard of him he was in the South of Ireland with his van - something to do with cheap diesel. It could only be a matter time before the authorities caught up with him and he could hardly take care of Eleanor from behind the bars of a prison cell.

Which left me.

"We still need bread," I reminded her. "And some other stuff by the looks of it. I'd better drive over to Tescos and stock up for the week."

"Let me dry my hair," she said. "And I'll come with you."

We took my father's Rover. It had more room than the Midget for a week's shopping, and as I drove I had the eerie sensation of being a married man once more, doing the things that married people do. Eleanor had dressed in her familiar style. She had repainted her lips and lined her eyes with precise strokes of charcoal, and of course underneath the dress would be underwear of the blackest black. So many layers of mourning, layer upon layer, all the way down to a heart she kept warm for the benefit of those who loved her, but otherwise seemed barely capable of keeping herself alive.

People looked as we walked through the doors of the supermarket, me with the trolley, Eleanor gaunt and tissue thin at my side. Even the suited greeter's benign smile sagged at her passing. I had been used to people gazing at Annie, at least the men, helplessly drawn by her blonde hair and her good looks. Eleanor was beautiful, too but there was an air of something tragic about her, like a shredded rose. That's what struck you, the conflict of a beauty spoiled. It could provoke sympathy, or it could be repulsive.

We were lost in the maze of aisles, impossibly caught up in a crush of people and clattering trolleys when suddenly there came a voice calling my name. Then a trolley was pushed in front of mine, bringing me to a jarring halt.

"Tom. Hi!"

For a moment I regarded the stranger before me, this bubbly looking woman, her looks, her voice familiar from another place. Yes, I had slept with this woman. I had made love to her, a woman whose hair I had ruffled and on whose soft neck I had left the bites of an unexpectedly urgent passion. Her name? Yes... Her name...

"Carol. Hi."

She was wearing a short skirt that showed off her tanned legs. There was an expensive leather jacket and her hair was newly permed, hanging in ringlets. She appeared exotic,... stunning and to my dismay, through the fog of my confusion I became at once, quite obviously aroused.

"Where have you been?" she was saying.

It was a measure of Eleanor's detachment that it took a moment for Carol to register that we were actually together. She seemed at once embarrassed. "Is it... Annie?"

I hastened to reassure her. "No, no. This is Eleanor."

Carol repeated the name, her eyes still seeking clarification. "Eleanor?"

"Yes. Eleanor's my - em..."

"Mother," chipped in Eleanor. "I'm sorry," she said, holding out her hand. "I'm not really with it today. I think we've spoken on the telephone."

Carol was confused. "Of course... yes, but I imagined you being... a bit older."

Eleanor smiled and took command of the trolley. "It's a long story," she said. "Why don't you two go and have a coffee. I'll see

you later, Tom."

I'm not sure what was going through Carol's mind. Perhaps she was angry with me for not calling her sooner, for not wanting to rush in and share the mortgage on her flat. A coffee sounded like a good idea, but she looked at Eleanor, then at me, back and forth a few times, as if reading something that had been scrawled upon our foreheads.

"Actually," she said. "I'm in a bit of a hurry. Some other time, eh? It was nice meeting you, Eleanor."

"Hold on a sec.! "

"No, really, Tom. Got to rush. Bye. "

I watched as she pushed away through the crush of bodies. "I'll call you later, then," I called.

"Whatever," she replied, which didn't sound very promising.

"Do you think I should go after her?"

She raised her eyes in a sort of despair, then swept away with the trolley. "Whatever. But before you do anything else, I'd zip up your jacket or you'll have us both thrown out."

"Eh? Oh."

Later, we sat in the restaurant, sharing a coffee, the coffee I might have been sharing with Carol. Eleanor sat a while, lost in the swirls of her cup as she stirred it slowly.

"Carol was very,.... sensual," she concluded eventually. "Good looking. Very pretty face,... not beautiful but very,... sensual. Some women are like that aren't they? It's in the way they move, the way they hold themselves, rather than their physical appearance. You can get a woman who's physically very attractive, yet completely sexless." She smiled. " I can see why you were interested in her."

"It was more than sex, if that's what you think. We've talked. We've listened to music."

"It must have been good sex to have you react like that, just at the sight of her. I thought only teenagers got turned on so fast."

I squirmed in embarrassment. "I'm sorry about that,..."

"It's nothing to be ashamed about. So,... spill it. I want details."

"She was very,... confident," I said. "I've never been with anyone like that. Me and Annie,... well she always seemed to view it as a chore, just another demand, on the same scale as the kids whining for toys in Woolworths every Saturday. And you're wrong: It is something I should be ashamed of. You warned me to stay away from her unless I was sure. I wasn't, but I did it anyway. I wanted a

bit of excitement."

"Wild and hard, Tom."

"Pardon?"

"You wanted it wild and hard." She turned away and picked out a pretty, dark haired girl who was settling at a nearby table. "What about her? She's gorgeous, isn't she."

"I suppose so," I said, unsure where this was leading.

"Look at her breasts. I'd give anything for breasts like those. I bet they don't instantly point at the floor when she takes her bra off, like mine do."

"Eleanor!"

"Hush. Now look how they move. Imagine them brushing against you. And just look at her bottom. Isn't it neat? Those legs? Imagine having them wrapped around you. Can you imagine giving it to her? I can. I can imagine the coolness of those plump little buttocks in my palms and the scent of her as I nuzzle inside her pants,...."

"Eleanor, please,..."

"Am I shocking you? But you're a man of the world. Nice fantasy, though, eh?"

"You paint a vivid picture, but what exactly are you driving at?"

"Anyone can give you wild and hard, Tom. It's the other that's not so easy,... the warm and tender, the desire to be with someone, to hold their hand,... to simply want to be with someone because they are who they are. You know all this. I shouldn't have to explain it to you. It’s what you’ve wanted all your life."

I was reminded then of the dream, of Rachel's words, which were really my words. "I want to be with you," she'd said. Not "I love you," or "I want you," or "give it to me Big Boy," but more simply and more profoundly: "I want to be with you."

I looked at the girl. She seemed good-natured, quick to smile, and was reserved with her gestures. "She looks nice. I'm sure she could be very warm and tender. Carol could be warm too,..."

"She looked hard to me, Tom. Hard as nails."

"You can't possibly tell that from a glance."

"Oh, we girls have a way of looking at one another and making instant judgements - not always accurate I admit, but all the same, impressions that'll withstand a lifetime of arguments to the contrary. You saw the way she looked at me. I mean what else do you think upset her?"

"She was upset? I don't know what you mean."

"She looked at us like she thought we were lovers."

"No, she's been though a lot..."

"So have you. But it's not stopped you from being the same old Tom. The same nice old Tom."

I cringed. "Please! Don't call me that. 'you're a nice bloke, Tom,... but!' There's always a 'but'."

She laughed and pressed my hand. "No 'buts' And there's nothing wrong with 'nice'. All I'm saying is be careful. Wild and hard is okay sometimes, but it burns out too quick. You just end up tired and covered in bruises. Anyway, if Carol meant as much as all that to you, why aren't you chasing her? Why are you still sitting here with me, with sad, sorry old Eleanor?"

"I just thought it was best if I leave it a while,... let her calm down. I'll call her tonight and explain. Anyway, if you thought she was hard - what did she think of you? What did she read in you?"

Eleanor smiled. "Simple. A four letter word beginning with 'T', rhymes with 'heart'. I'm sorry, but I think Carol's the jealous type and you've some explaining to do, when you see her again - not that she'll ever believe you, I don't think."

"Eleanor I made it perfectly plain that you were my stepmother.".

"Tom,... look at me: do I look like a stepmother?"

As we rose to leave, the dark haired girl looked up and glanced briefly at Eleanor. It was a look of subdued surprise and curiosity, perhaps even attraction. On the way out I asked her what she'd meant, imagining herself capable of sex with the girl.

"Did that surprise you?"

"Well, it's just that you led me to believe you couldn't care less about it either way these days."

She shrugged. "Mostly that's true - but sometimes,... just sometimes,.... you know?"

"Sure," I said, "I know. "

A Tart. Eleanor was a Tart. At least that's what she would have had me believe Carol thought,... that she suspected there was something going on between me and Eleanor. It didn't seem reasonable, but in the end, I didn't call her and that, as Eleanor would probably have said, was good.

I let her slide away, and was ashamed now by how easily I did it. I wondered what sort of man I was becoming. But the simple

truth was I hadn't loved her. I was dead from the neck up, quite incapable of feeling, of loving anyone,... anyone but Rachel.

That evening, I went through the ritual of checking my 'phone for messages, but there were none. I had hoped she might have called as she'd promised and eventually I retired to my bed feeling empty and alone. There, I gazed at her picture while twiddling the dial of my radio around 208 meters in search of Radio Luxembourg and the dreams of adolescence. There was nothing of course. The big L was gone and Bob Stewart no longer counted down the top forty. Instead from out of the nearby static emerged French speaking stations purveying a soft seductive music that drew me in until I settled into a fitful sleep. And it seemed to me then as if Paris was calling.

CHAPTER 26

I drove to the airport in the grey light of a watery dawn. The motorway was sluggish, the traffic slowing to an inevitable crawl as I neared my exit. Airliners were coming in on a course parallel to my own, their fuselages seeming impossibly long and thin and it seemed impossible to me they would not snap clean in two. All this movement, I thought: so many people doing nothing but moving from one place to another!

All the airports I had ever passed through seemed much the same to me with their expanses of glass and dull concrete. They made me nervous with their signs and their endless choice of direction and destination. Yet people flowed through as surely as the bottles on Bexleys production line, seemingly unfazed by a system which was to me always bewildering.

Paris was an hour and a half away. I could barely drive to Birmingham in that time, and yet it was another world to me, totally unknown. Sitting in the departure lounge at Manchester, pretending to relax behind my newspaper, I began to wonder what I thought I was doing. This was me after all, indisputably middle aged now, my cloth distinctly cut and tailored in the style of around nineteen eighty five. And I was a small town boy, spat out of Middleton's County High in the dying days of the seventies, swapping regulation blue for a kipper tie and a Bambi speckled shirt, to be trained as factory fodder for a profession that was already beginning its terminal decline. Small town boys didn't fly to places like Paris to pursue their careers, I thought. Small town boys didn't have careers: they had jobs.

My flight appeared on the departures board and began slowly moving its way to the top of the pile. Then the lounge began to fill with calmer suits than mine. There were briefcases and mobile phones sported like fashion accessories.

I wondered about these people. They could have been movie stars, so well groomed they seemed, their hair impossibly under control, tanned skin, trouser legs unwrinkled. Were these also small town girls and boys, or the elite from Manchester's business districts? No factory fodder, these, I thought, and I was impressed by the shiny glow of their youth. Their hands had never touched a lathe, nor fashioned a chisel edge on a pencil, nor puzzled over an

orthographic projection. No, I thought, not entirely without cynicism, a projection to these people would mean something else entirely.

Perhaps they had been right to throw away the drawing boards at County High, right to concentrate on cardboard and coat-hangers instead of motor car engines, right to intellectualise technology into a meaningless trivia, instead of practising it with relish. Instead, all those well rounded adults would swell airport lounges the world over with their suits and their briefcases and their impressive, world-class mobility - for it seemed to me now the modern world was built on change, on movement. Now, there were so many ways to live, so many lives in one lifetime and conversely, fewer choices for a single grooved small town chap like me.

Before lunch time, I was there. Paris was another concrete and glass airport and a manic drive by careless taxi amid more concrete and glass. There were glimpses of the Seine, and long houseboats - a hint at the fabled romance of this city, which to me might otherwise have been London or Frankfurt, just dust and dirt and graffiti. And at the end of this chaos was Philippe, until now a voice on the telephone, materialising at the foot of a grey office block.

He was a rotund youth, bespectacled and floppy haired and he welcomed me in perfect English, laughing politely at my response in pidgin French.

"You will like it here, I think," he said.

"Don't I have to get through an interview first?"

He laughed, again good-naturedly. "I think you will find it is merely a formality."

"I see."

When I walked into the interview room, I experienced a moment of deja vu. There were three shirt sleeved men and one pretty woman with short, dark hair. The questions were easy, the air informal. It was the woman, Claudette who led the pace, the others chipping in the odd question now and then. But they asked nothing to make me sweat and after ten minutes I got the impression I would have to have been a bit of a donkey not to get through.

I had worked as an engineer on marine diesels for most of my life. I knew the difference between a screw and a rivet which was fine. I was qualified. I was in. The whole thing took about half an hour, then Claudette leaned back in her seat and smiled.

"Very well, Thomas. Is there anything you would like to ask us?"

"Erm,... could I see your,.... workshops?"

That raised a smile. "Of course. Philippe will show you. Is there anything else?"

"How soon will I know,... about the job?"

There was an exchange of glances and then Claudette said it was mine if I wanted it. "Think it over. Let your personnel officer know what you decide."

"That's great," I said, not sure if it was great or not. "Can I ask about the relocation allowance?"

"We don't have the details,... your personnel officer will speak to you,... but I think you will find it is very generous."

"I'm sure it is," I said.

In fact I already knew it was. I was simply looking for a dark lining to what was suddenly becoming an alarmingly silver cloud. They'd find me a decent flat in the suburbs, or a house out of town and they would pay for it for the first two years, by which time I'd be on my feet.

Outside, Philippe shook my hand in congratulations. "A formality, Yes? You see, we need at least ten of you to come over. We need your detailed knowledge if we are to pick up your work. So far, only four of your colleagues seem interested."

"We're all a bit set in our ways, I guess."

"Change is hard," he said with a shrug. "We would not like this if it were the other way around."

"But I'd give you a job any day, Philippe."

He blushed. "And I would be pleased to accept it," he said. "But unfortunately, I think my wife would not appreciate my going, nor my children."

And then it hit me. Annie didn't even know I was there. Only Eleanor knew where I was in the world. Only Eleanor was thinking of me here.

The workshops were bright busy places with new machines and clean floors - unlike the dim, oil ingrained, decaying caverns at Derby's. Wandering through them with Philippe, I knew that if my job were the most important thing in my life then I'd be a fool not to come. But if the job had ever been that important I would have been a lot higher up the ladder at forty-two than I was. I would no longer be driving a computer workstation, sorting out the nitty-gritty of design, the geometry, the dimensions, the methods of manufacture.

Later, driving back to the hotel I felt the immensity of the city sprawling out and swallowing me down into its concrete bowels. Its noise and its smell had me longing for home and all I could think as the taxi twitched and jerked its perilous way into the centre was how the hell I could ever hope to settle in a place like this.

The hotel was a small but respectable establishment favoured by other engineers and executives from Derby's who visited Paris more frequently than I. It was a few stars higher than I would normally have chosen, had I been paying for it myself, but I wasn't, so I indulged myself, dining early and quite recklessly a la carte. Then I retired to my room to take my pick from the mini-bar, mixing myself a large gin and tonic in whose company I retired to the bathroom.

There, my head swimming with a mixture of fatigue and alcohol, I soaked myself in a hot bath, eyes closed, trying to relax my body, to give myself a chance at sleep. My mind was wandering, skipping here and there, settling on nothing. One minute I was driving a fully restored Midget through the Yorkshire Dales with my father beside me, and the next I was sipping tea, a lonely ex-pat Englishman in some pretty French provincial town, reading letters from home, from Eleanor.

And then I sensed the bathroom door opening.

It was not real, just a notion in my head, as was the rich perfume that filled the tiny, steamy space. My eyes remained closed, but in my mind I looked up and saw Rachel standing in the doorway. She was no longer the schoolgirl, nor the teenager of my distant memory, but the woman in the blue dress, the woman from the dining room of the Dunnet Arms Hotel.

Slowly, she knelt by the bath and leaned lazily upon its rim.

"I was wondering where you'd got to," I said.

"Sorry," she replied, a little glum. "I am meaning to phone, really."

"Why don't you?"

She sighed and trailed her fingers in the water. "Perhaps I will,... soon. Anyway. What are you doing here? We're not finished yet."

"I thought you'd rejected me."

"Not quite."

"I wish you had."

"But why?"

"You know why! I need you to reject me, then I can get you out

of my system and move on."

"Then it's your fault," she countered. "You didn't tell me properly that you loved me, that you wanted to be with me. How can you expect clarity from me, if you're too timid to be clear and honest yourself?"

"I didn't want to frighten you off."

"But that would imply you harbour some hope. It would imply that you really want to be with me?"

"Did I say that? I don't know. I can't imagine being with you, Rachel,... only aching because I'm without you."

"But that's good, isn't it? It's good you feel that way about me."

"It would be, I suppose, normally, but I don't feel the other normal things I should feel when I think of you. I can't imagine making love to you, nor even what you might look like undressed."

"But you fell in love with me when such things were unknown and unimaginable to you."

She rose then and slipped the straps of her dress. In this fantasy, she wore no underwear and the dress fell to reveal a divine nudity, a form I had pieced together like a collage of parts from the bodies of Annie, and Carol, and all the other women I have known.

"There," she said, running her palms along her thighs. "Now you see me."

"But it's not really you, is it?"

"It's near enough," she said and gingerly, she dipped her toe in the bath water as if she were about to climb in with me. Then my mobile phone began to bleep,.... and she was gone.

I wrapped myself in a towel, walked through to the bedroom and fished the infernal thing out of my jacket pocket.

"Hi, Tom. It's Rachel. I'm sorry for leaving you so suddenly."

"Eh? Oh,.... Rachel? I was just thinking of you."

"You were? I rather like the sound of that."

"I thought I'd scared you off."

"No, silly. I did say I'd call."

"I know,..."

"Did you think I'd just run out on you that morning?"

"I wasn't sure. I wouldn't have blamed you."

"I promise you it wasn't like that. I lay awake most of the night thinking about you,... looking forward to spending the day with you, but then I had to go and I was so disappointed. Anyway, listen,... there have been some big changes at work since I last saw

you. Jefferson's moved back to Norwich and they offered me the job of General Manager. I'm running the place now. Can you believe it?"

I was stunned, proud of her too. For all her troubles, she had kept going. She had used the intelligence implied in those eight O levels, and swum smartly against the current, when most would simply have drowned.

"That's great, Rachel."

"I know. It was a bit of a surprise. I was sure they would have given it to some up and coming kid from head office, not that I'm complaining. But that isn't why I called. Look Tom, I've been thinking about what you said. About us going out together."

"Well,... I was a bit mixed up."

"Now, don't spoil it. I'd really like to see you again. How about tonight? I'll pick you up. Where are you?"

"Paris," I said. Suddenly I felt like a high flier, though this was the first time I'd been out of Middleton in years.

"Paris! Well, it won't be tonight then. When are you coming home?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

"What's your flight number?"

"BA 1607, I think."

"I'll meet you then."

"Where?"

"At the Airport, silly. Have you any plans for the weekend?"

"Well, I hadn't thought that far yet."

"Good. How about that walk along a beach we promised ourselves?"

"Sounds good."

"See you tomorrow then. Bye."

She rang off, but I remained for a long while, still dripping from my bath and with the phone pressed to my ear until the towel, of its own accord, unwound from my waist to leave me naked and completely amazed. Surely, I thought, this meant something! Rachel was waiting for me at the end of tomorrow - and somehow I had to tell her that I loved her.

CHAPTER 27

The aeroplane touched down on a wet and cloudy Manchester tea time. I remained in my seat for a while, letting the crush of passengers disembark, not even daring to hope she might be there, for it still seemed incredible to me, the very idea that Rachel Standish was meeting my flight.

The cabin was empty before I made my move, plunging into the bewildering complexity of the airport, eventually to emerge dazed and blinking and mole-like into the arrivals hall. She was there. I saw her before she saw me, thus giving me the chance to observe her candidly for a while as I was swept towards her by the tide of people. She was wearing a tight top and a floral, wrap-around skirt, like she'd just walked off a beach. She looked stunning in the mixture of her strangeness, and yet also her ageless familiarity.

It seemed more my place to shuffle by unseen while she gazed into the crowd looking for someone else, looking for the bright young man who had once been John Ogilvy. But by some mysterious process, some queer unravelling of fate, if only for today, it was me she was looking for.

"Hi," I said, puzzled by the neat little suitcase on the floor behind her.

She started, then laughed. "Tom. You're here."

She kissed me, or at least I felt her cheek brush mine. It was an innocent gesture, but was for me more significant for it being the closest we had ever come together. I felt the texture of her skin against my five o'clock shadow and I caught the scent of soap. I felt a heat, and for just a moment, from the way she held herself, an impression of a deeper part of her.

"Come on," she said. "Our plane leaves in an hour."

"Eh?"

"Majorca."

"You're having me on!"

"No. It was a special deal at the travel agents this morning. Short notice - weekend for two in Majorca. Well? What do you say?"

She misread my hesitation. "It's all right isn't it? I mean you said you had no plans or anything. I thought it would be fun."

I felt groggy after my trip. Also I felt dishevelled and grey beside her brightness and her energy. "It's fine. It's,.... unbelievable. It's just

that when you said a beach, I thought you meant - I don't know - Formby Point or somewhere."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with Formby Point of course, except it'll be freezing. I've been to this place before, passed through it once - it'll be so quiet at this time of year. And I know we'll have the beach to ourselves. You'll love it."

"I'm sure I will."

Suddenly I remembered the vision of her last night and her chastisement for my not being honest and open with her. It was a fantasy, the words had been my own, and yet they had been spontaneous in a way that was entirely mysterious to me.

"Rachel,... there's something I should say,..."

"I'm sorry,.... you're tired. Lets find somewhere we can sit down. Would you like a coffee?"

"Rachel,... please,... before we go on, there's really something I have to tell you."

"You look so serious. What is it?"

"Rachel, I love you."

She looked at me, her expression one of bemusement. "What?"

"I love you."

"That's what I thought you said."

"I've loved you since I was fourteen years old. There hasn't a day gone by when I haven't thought of you, or wondered what you were doing. I have always loved you and you will be a part of me until I die."

There was an understandable and significant pause while she took this in. "You're serious?"

I tried to soften the shock of it with smile. "Yes," I said. "Now, if you still want to risk a weekend alone with a guy who's just told you that, then lead on."

She shook her head as if to clear it. Then, slowly, she returned my smile, took hold of the limp remains of my tie and led me through the crowd. "Let's go and check in."

I followed. I gave myself over to her entirely and I followed, ignoring signs and directions, just letting her show me the way. Half an hour later, we were in the departure lounge. sipping cappuccino, and she was looking at me.

"There's something I'd better do," I said, taking out my 'phone. "I'd better ring Eleanor."

"Sure."

"Eleanor's the woman I'm living with."

She turned her head a fraction, bringing one slightly raised eyebrow to bear, but said nothing.

"The beautiful young woman," I added. "Who I'm living with."

"You've already said that. Except for the beautiful and the young part. She's your sister, I suppose?"

"No."

"Your daughter then?"

"No."

"Lover?"

"No. My stepmother."

"I take it there's a story here. Are you going to tell me about it?"

"Yes," I said. "I think I'd better."

Briefly, I laid out the bare facts leading up to my living with Eleanor. As I spoke to her, I knew this was a crucial exchange between us, but not because I couldn't bear the thought of ever losing her, more that if she were to go, it had to be for reasons entirely between the two of us and not caused by the interference, however innocent, of another woman.

Rachel waited until I'd finished. "I'm sorry about your dad. Mine passed away last year. I take it someone in your recent past has misconstrued the way things lie between you and Eleanor?"

"You could say that. Eleanor's my best, my only friend."

Rachel smiled. "So what's the problem?."

"If there's anything you want to know, just ask. I have no secrets."

"There is just one thing," she said and then she leaned forward intently. "Did you really mean it? What you said before, about loving me. Only there are some things you should never joke about, and you know that's one of them."

"It's not a joke. I mean it, truly. I just never believed one day I'd be sitting this close to you, that I'd ever summon the nerve to tell you so directly."

She glanced away, her eyes darting nervously. I'd unsettled her. "I know you hinted at something last time, about having a crush on me. I'd no idea it had been so serious."

"Please,.... don't worry. You weren't to know."

"I can't believe it. All those years at school and you never said anything. I wish you had. I was desperate for someone to ask me out back then. But no one ever did."

"I was afraid."

"How could you have been so sure I'd say 'no'?"

"Sometime it's easier to hope than to risk having it all dashed by rejection - a coward's philosophy, but that's me."

"I'm an old ghost then?"

I felt stung by her perception. Sure, I had begun in Langholm Avenue, months ago, thinking that's exactly what she was, an old ghost come to haunt me, but sitting there close to her once more, it came to me again as it had that night at the Dunnet, the sense of certainty, that all I had managed to do over the years was seal her off behind the thinnest of membranes, only to have her emerge now looking exactly as she had always done, provoking in me the same emotions, the same heat, the same restlessness. She embodied the vital clue to all the feeling, all the emotion my life no longer contained.

"If that were true, I shouldn't feel the way I do about you, not now, after all this time. I've been feeling confused by the way my life's turned out, and I thought maybe after seeing you, things would be clearer, like touching the past, I suppose. I wondered what it would feel like, just to sit with you, how I would feel inside. I imagined it would be pleasant, a little nostalgic perhaps."

"And how does it feel?"

"Shocking."

"Shocking?"

"Looking through these eyes, Rachel, you won't believe how little you have changed, and how much I still love you. The past twenty five years, the whole of my adult life might as well never have been for all the effect it's had in erasing my memory of you."

She breathed deeply, her breast rising slowly, then falling as she exhaled deliberately. "And I thought I was going to surprise you," she said.

"You have, believe me. I'm just not sure if it's real or if I'm still dreaming in my bath in Paris."

"You've dreamed,.... about me?..."

"We've had many conversations, you and I over the years. Conversations not unlike this one. Except this time, your words are your own, and not from my subconscious mind."

She drew away slowly, shaking her head and smiling in a mixture of disbelief and apprehension. "Tom,... you're,..."

"A nutter?"

"Very open. In fact your sincerity is blistering."

"I'm not normally like this," I assured her. "But then you're not just anyone,... you're Rachel. Rachel Standish."

"And I'd say you were trying very hard to get me into bed."

"Oh no. A man does not set out to seduce a goddess."

"Lest she become human?"

"Lest he should burst into flames at the first touch."

She laughed, not unkindly, and turned away. "Tom I don't know what to say, what to do."

"Take me to Majorca," I said. "Find us that beach and let's take our walk."

She nodded, then laid her hand across the table and sealed it around mine. From the short periods I had actually spent in her company and from the pieces of her life's history I had thus far gleaned, I had put together a picture of a confident and energetic woman, not entirely undamaged by her past. There had been affairs, perhaps many, but none had led to happiness and now she seemed to have reached a point in her life where she had come to terms with being alone.

But if that were true, I should have stood less chance of being with her than at any other time in her life, save perhaps the better years of her marriage to John. Yet she looked at me now with wide and hungry eyes that had me wondering if it was me she saw at all.

CHAPTER 28

It was midnight on Majorca. There was concrete and glass and a clean, comfortable air, like springtime in England, and there was a taxi ride down ever narrowing roads until we reached a secluded, white fronted hotel aglow with moonlight. We stepped out into the road and I watched the taxi disappear, then felt the night closing around us, Rachel and I alone in the middle of an exotic nowhere, the half open door of the hotel beckoning us inside to rest, to shelter, and to an unimaginable fate.

From here my life would either explode into immeasurable joy, or it would sour into an unbearable agony. I could see no middle path, and so I hesitated.

"Right then," said Rachel, but her voice betrayed her own nervousness.

"I can hear the sea. "

She took a long, slow breath and savoured it. "Yes .Can you smell it? "

" I think so."

And we might have stayed there until morning contemplating the sounds of the sea but a figure appeared in the doorway and beckoned us inside. I did not know what arrangements she had made for our stay. Perhaps it sounds ridiculous but I had thought it indelicate to enquire during the flight over. It would have been to brush dangerously close to a subject it seemed I was determined to avoid. The hotel manager, a rotund and jovial Spaniard, led us to the top floor of his modest abode, eventually throwing open a door on the top floor, then stepping aside for Rachel to enter. I held back a moment, thinking he would take the lead and show me to another room, but with a smile and tilt of his head, he beckoned me inside. It was small, he said in tones of genuine apology but he explained it had a balcony overlooking the bay and was thus one of the finest rooms he had.

The bay was invisible in the darkness but the sounds of the sea came louder now, filling the room with its rhythm and its scent, so that I felt sure it could be only a stone's throw away.

He wished us both a good night, then left.

"There's just the one bed then," I observed.

"I know. I'm sorry, there was no choice. I didn't think you'd

mind. We're neither of us children, Tom."

"I'll sleep on the couch then."

"There isn't a couch, silly. You'll sleep here, with me."

She turned down the bed, then went into the bathroom. "I'll be out in a minute."

My head was spinning suddenly, the floor moving like the deck of a ship in a storm. I did not want what I now understood might be coming and I had not expected to face it so soon. I did not want to sink myself, so stained by adulthood, inside of Her - she who was so firmly rooted in the innocence of my youth. I did not want Her to become real,.. to become simply,... her..

Had we been adolescents, our date would have been different - a Saturday morning rendezvous in Middleton park, perhaps - the bandstand at ten, then a walk, a talk and ice-cream on a bench overlooking the lake. It would have been a seduction of course, but its consummation would have been the sealing of her hand in mine - the feel of her skin, and in the weeks to come, perhaps a kiss, my instincts guided by her eyes, her tone, her touch, her smell,... such dizzy innocence! We moved so fast these days,... always choosing sex before ice-cream - and we missed so much.

I waited on the balcony, drawing down great lungs full of that exotic air and when I turned back, she was slipping into bed. I caught a shimmer of thigh beneath a slip of turquoise satin and I felt the panic rising in my chest: Never mind that I didn't want to! What if I couldn't?

She patted the space beside her. "Come on," she said. "You must be tired."

Now there are many subtle nuances of language that are generally wasted on me, words which, when combined with certain situations, can mean something other than what is merely being said. But I had been married for a long time and I understood the word 'tired' in this particular context.

She was telling me it would not happen tonight.

"Sure," I said. "It's been a long day. I haven't been out of Middleton in decades, and suddenly I'm jetting all over Europe."

"Let's sleep then."

"You mean sleep with you?"

"Yes, with me."

She turned off the light, allowing me some privacy while I stripped down to my shorts. Then I slunk into the bathroom, trying

to urinate without a sound, for she was certain to hear in such a tiny room. And this was Rachel! Rachel Standish! I showered for ages, leaning back beneath a lukewarm trickle, trying to rinse away the accumulated odours of a long and eventful day. I was about to lie with her and had become suddenly paranoid about my body. It was not perfect, not muscular and firm, but I could do nothing about that - still, I could at least make sure that, whatever it was, it did not smell.

Eventually, I settled beside her, my head sinking onto the pillow next to hers, my body rigid and feeling somehow brittle, like a dry old stick. Still she did not see me, did not know me, even when she raised herself up on one elbow for a moment and laid her head against my neck.

"I wish you'd told me before that you loved me," she said.

I wondered then, as I had wondered many times those past months, how different our lives would have been now, if I had told her. Perhaps if she'd said 'yes' to me all those years ago, we would simply have run our course like so many teenage romances do. Perhaps she would have tired of me and left me with a broken heart, but cleansed of my love for her.

"I don't think I was ever meant to tell you," I said. "It was not meant to be, not then,..."

"And now?"

"Tomorrow," I said. "Let's take our walk in the sand. Perhaps then we'll know."

I could feel her, the full heat of her softness pressing against the length of my body, from the brush of her hair to the pleasing prickle of her toes against my feet. I could hear the sea and I could smell it as the air wafted in, making the curtains float.

I sealed my palm around the coolness of her arm and closed my eyes. She did not move, except for her lashes which I felt brushing softly against my cheek, blinking slowly,... open, closed,... open,.... closed,... and gradually, I felt myself relaxing into her.

In life, there are only a few cherished moments we are aware of as they unfold. The rest we enjoy in retrospect, and they are pale by comparison. Lying there that night with Rachel, as I sank into the shallow waters which sufficed for sleep in those days, I felt it would always be the most cherished, the most precious moment of my life.

In the morning, I awoke to find her still sleeping, still pressed against me, the two of us glued together by our heat. I moved away

a fraction, but carefully so as not to wake her, then I gazed upon her with a growing sense of wonder.

Her shoulders were freckled, like her nose and cheeks, things remembered from so long ago and familiar to me. But then her strap slid down, and a fold of turquoise satin peeled aside, allowing me a glimpse of the voluptuous curve of her breast, and a nipple of the purest, softest pink. I had rarely thought of her with breasts at all, so small, so discreet she had been as a girl, and though it might sound ridiculous to you, it took such a thing now to remind me that Rachel was a mature and experienced woman, a woman in her forties with half her life behind her.

Slowly, my sense of wonder was eroded by anxiety. I did not want to risk her waking while we lay so close. I slid from bed and I dressed quietly. When she eventually woke up, I was on the balcony, gazing out at an azure sea with white surf breaking gently along a vast, idyllic crescent of white sand.

She came sleepily to me then and laid her head against my shoulder. "Still love me this morning?"

"I will always love you, Rachel."

"I think it frightens me."

"Don't let it. If today is all we have, it's more than I ever dreamed of. And I'm grateful for it."

She kissed my cheek, her warm breath curling around my neck. "The beach looks perfect," she whispered. "Lets go down now before anyone else is about. I want us to have it to ourselves."

She wore a wrap-around skirt over a bright red swimming costume. She held my hand as we walked and every other step revealed a long and lovely leg. We kicked off our shoes and stepped onto the cool sand, then slowly we made for the sea, almost counting every step. And when the water began to lap our toes, we struck out parallel to the shore, without much thought for how long or how far we should go.

It was the rhythm I remember, the slow steps, the wash of the waves, our breathing, the sway of her hips, her leg dancing in and out of view - and above all the feeling that I never wanted it to end, that each step was like a grain of sand falling through an hour-glass. I wanted us to walk on for ever, into the air, until we fell free of the earth and had only each other to cling to through eternity.

She turned to me suddenly. "Beyond those rocks," she said. "Let's do it."

I looked around in surprise. "Erm,.. do what?"

"Make love, silly! No one will see. Say you will!"

"Erm,... I think,..."

"Don't think,... just say 'yes'."

There was an urgency, and a hunger in her voice that made me fearful. But it was what she wanted more than anything at that moment and to have appeared reluctant might have ended the dream for her right there.

"We'll see then," I replied, hoping upon hope that beyond the rocks would be a line of burly fishermen, and so postpone her hunger. But instead we discovered an even more secluded bay, backed by cliffs and hidden from view, save perhaps from a passing boat of which that morning, there were none. The air was cool and electric and there was a stunning energy in the rhythm of the waves crashing upon the beach.

It was perfect.

And it was terrifying.

She unfastened her skirt and laid it down upon the sand, then she motioned to my trousers. "Hurry, before someone comes."

I felt awkward, untangling what I suddenly discovered was a very hard, very urgent erection from my shorts, and then felt stupid with it standing in the open air. She knelt at once, took my hips, then pulled me to her and drew me into the depths of her throat.

"Rachel,... please."

She made no reply. Instead, I felt the rhythm of her mouth and her tongue, tracing out my shape, caressing me, devouring me. I felt the heat rising almost at once, then a sharpness ready to tear and I tensed in anticipation, but she sensed my coming and delivered me back into the open air, wet and cooling while she smiled up at me with lips still moist and glistening. It was a look of the purest, deepest satisfaction and I felt myself ignite with desire.

With a furtive glance up and down the beach, she unfastened the poppers at the crotch of her costume to expose a shock of black hair through which protruded pink lips, already parting and slick with her preparedness. She spread her knees, drawing two perfect arcs in the soft sand and she leaned back, patting her thighs in gentle invitation. "Come to me," she said.

I felt the marshmallow softness of her flesh and the grit of the sand beneath us. I tasted salt and sex upon her lips and when she took me inside of her, I felt a fire burning over my hardness. But it

was a stranger beneath me, a stranger's flesh reacting against my own - twisting, testing, rolling and swelling me up with a delicious agony.

"Tell me," she said, as she wrapped me tightly with her arms and her legs. "Tell me that you love me!"

And I told her that I loved her. That I loved her,.... that I loved her!

Afterwards, we sat upon the beach, the sun warming our bodies as the sea sparkled and the waves filled the air with their energy. I felt so light, I might have been floating six inches clear above the sand. We were tranquil now, spent in the aftermath of our lovemaking. It had been brief, a first coupling, urgent and passionate, but she had not come,... had not needed to, she'd said, that it was enough to have taken me there like that, to have witnessed me lost to my emotions and my passions while in her arms, while inside of her body. Seeing the flicker of my disappointment, she took my hand and pressed it.

"We have all weekend," she said.

For all my earlier reluctance, my pride had been dented that I had not been able to satisfy her before I was stunned into uselessness by my own orgasm. It surprised me, that feeling, but as I thought about it, I realised it went much deeper, that I had already begun to fear there was a part of Rachel I could not reach.

Shortly, we made our way back and but for the sand on her skirt, it was as if nothing had happened. We walked with the same slow rhythm and as we cleared the rocks, we saw the bay opening out before us.

"Isn't this beautiful?" she said. "I'll never forget this, Tom. This place,... this day."

"Me neither."

I believe we both meant it, but as I spoke my eyes followed the curve of the bay, and I saw the long line of our footprints, the only evidence of our passing, and soon to be washed away by the incoming tide. We had walked hand in hand; we had made love with a sudden and remarkable urgency, but our footprints remained an arm's length apart. They were parallel tracks heading, for now, in the same direction, but never merging, never combining, except for one frenzied moment, back there.

"You were great," she said.

"You too."

"It's so long since I've been with a man, Tom."

"Can I ask you why? You look so good, you must get lots of attention."

"I'm not in bad nick for a woman in her forties, I suppose, and I do attract attention. It's flattering,... but I'm always wary. I have a life that I've built for myself over the years, a job I enjoy so much I don't see it as work at all. I don't really need a man for anything other than pleasure and company. Men like my looks, but not my independence, not for very long anyway. They always end up seeing their own lives, their own jobs as more important than mine."

"What makes you think I'm any different?"

"I don't know that you are," she said. "Not yet."

"Then why? Why say 'yes' to me when you've said 'no' to so many others."

"Lots of reasons. The way you are when you're around me - it makes me feel young. I suppose it was knowing you at school. It's been provoking all sorts of memories from way back, from a time beyond, a time of sweetness and innocence that I'd forgotten had ever existed in my life. There are memories I wasn't even aware of having kept."

"I know. Memories like that have been haunting me for months now, but all they do is make me feel old."

"They shouldn't. You're wearing well, Tom. But there is one compelling reason why I should go out with you."

"And that is?"

"Because you're in love with me, silly."

At the hotel, we showered and she changed into a tee-shirt. Then she shook the sand from her skirt and said it would do for the day. Before we left the room though, she stood by the door and parted the gossamer folds of her skirt so I could see she wasn't wearing any panties. Then she caught my hand and placed it upon the heat of her mound.

"Think of me all day, like this," she said. "And at the end of the day, this will be waiting for you."

With any other woman this would have been a dream come true, a fantasy so astonishing it would never be believed by anyone who in future years I might recount it to. Yet there it was. My mouth grew dry and I began to stiffen at once. She was quick to notice and slipped her hand deftly into my pocket in order to savour my reaction. But even through the sweet agony of those

teasing fingers, I saw clearly the inevitable had happened. I had not burst into flames, but the goddess was becoming human. She was high on my love for her, aroused to passion and intent on giving herself to me, her body, a vessel of a certain shape into which I might sink myself.

Many thoughts came to me at that moment, layer upon layer of them superimposed and transparent like stained glass windows, so I had the impression of looking though them all at the same time. There were happy thoughts, some fearful, some of guilt and underpinning them all was suddenly a hope in the possibility that one day, as in the dream, she would lift her eyes to mine unhindered by the urgent and beguiling voice of sex to say simply that she wanted to be with me. If there was to be lasting happiness, that time would have to come, I thought, and thus ever so subtly I was seduced into abandoning my quest for deliverance from her, in exchange for the prospect of spending the rest of my life waiting to hear her say those words.

There was no other but Rachel and in searching for a way back to Her, I had been searching for the source of love. I had been reaching back to the time in my life when simply to be in love was reason enough to live. Now I had found Her; I had touched the source; I had confessed to it, made love to it; I had shed my shell of adulthood and felt once more the thorny side of love beneath my skin - and in doing so had learned the awful truth about my life: that for all of my life I had been incapable of loving anyone but her.

CHAPTER 29

If Eleanor was glad to see me when I returned to Middleton, late that Sunday evening, she hid it well. She opened the door a crack then lowered her eyes and turned away. I dropped my bags in the hall and followed her through to the front room, where I collapsed wearily into my father's armchair. It had been the trip of a lifetime, but now I was glad to be home, glad for the time and the space to think about what it all might mean.

Eleanor sat hugging her knees on the rug, and for while we exchanged no words. She seemed dazed and introspective. She'd been that way for weeks, giving me the impression I was witnessing the slow sinking of her spirits. I missed my father, but with the passing of each day, things were becoming a little easier, a little clearer, the memories easier to dwell upon without feelings of despair. Eleanor however, seemed to have made no progress at all, and living under the same roof alone with her, I had begun to feel the weight of her mood. It had been like this for Phil, I thought and now I understood how helpless he'd felt. She was falling apart, and there seemed little I could do.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Sure. You?"

"Oh, fine."

"How was your trip?"

"Paris? Paris went well."

"And Majorca?" she asked.

"Majorca,..." I paused, wondering how could I begin to describe two of the happiest days of my life to someone still in the grip of such a black and cloying depression. "It wasn't what I expected,"

"You mean Rachel?"

"Yes. It's strange. I just thought she might have been a bit more reserved, you know? I thought she would have held me at a distance for a while, until she was sure of me."

"Did you by any chance tell her that you loved her?"

"It was what I'd set out to do."

"You did tell her then?"

"Yes. But surely it takes time before something like that sinks in. If someone came up to me out of the blue and said they loved me, I might be flattered but I doubt I'd believe them, not right away.

They'd have to prove it, over time. Rachel,... well, Rachel more or less threw herself at me."

"Then perhaps you're just cynical," said Eleanor. "I can't say for sure that if I was her I wouldn't have gone a little overboard myself - you popping into my life like that, telling me you've always carried a flame for me."

She looked down and her long hair closed over her eyes like curtains being drawn. I could not see what she was feeling, could not guess what she was thinking.

"Eleanor, what is it?"

"I'm leaving," she said.

"You can't. Where will you go?"

She didn't answer. It was then I looked up and saw the letter on the mantle-piece. It was recorded delivery, official looking - addressed to Eleanor.

"Has something happened?"

"It's a solicitor's letter," she said following my gaze. "Eric wants your dad's estate to go to probate or something. I'm not sure what it means, except it doesn't sound good."

"Eric! Why can't he leave things alone? I'll have to speak to him."

"Just let it be, Tom."

"But he's after a court dividing it all up, most likely between you and me anyway. Then the first thing I'll do is give it all back to you - except by then a load of solicitors will have taken their cut. It's senseless!"

She was only half listening. "Your uncle only wants what's best for you."

"You mustn't go. This house is yours. Dad would have wanted that more than anything. He made me promise to make sure you were okay if anything happened to him. And I'm sorry but I'm bloody well going to do that,... for as long as we both live, okay?"

She allowed me a glimpse of a smile. "Did Jack really say you'd to take care of me?"

I felt embarrassed now. "It was during one of his rare, morbid moments."

"That was lovely. But I'll be fine, Tom. I have a little money of my own."

"But who would you be with?"

"Do I have to be with anyone? It would be good to be my own person for a while. I'd write to you. Anyway, you should go to bed

now, or it'll seem a long day for you tomorrow."

"Okay. I suppose I should go. Rachel's picking me up after work."

"She is? She's coming here?" Eleanor seemed uneasy.

"If that's okay."

"Well of course it is. Why wouldn't it be? Are you going out somewhere?"

"She's taking me round to her place. She lives over on Highmoor."

"You're kidding, that's barely a few minutes drive from where you used to live."

"I know, ironic isn't it? After chasing her the length of the country she's been living within walking distance of me for the best part of ten years."

"I'd better make myself scarce when she comes."

"I'd rather you met."

"Don't you remember what happened with Carol? I wouldn't want her thinking there's something funny going on between us."

"Listen, anyone I get involved with, now or in the future has to accept that you're a part of my life, or I can't be with them, okay? I've already told her about you. She didn't bat an eye - that has to be good hasn't it?"

I felt an overwhelming urge then to hold her, to put my arm around her, but I held back, not sure if it was proper and in the end, I merely squeezed her shoulder in passing. She seemed to jump at the sudden contact, but then as if not to alarm me, she placed her hand on top of mine and our fingers brushed as I moved slowly away.

"Goodnight, Tom."

"Goodnight, Eleanor."

I found my room tidier and cleaner than I remembered leaving it. The carpet was freshly vacuumed, my underwear and shirts, carelessly discarded, had been gathered up and spirited downstairs into the washing basket. I did not ask, nor expect Eleanor to do these things. I was not exactly feckless in my ways, more forgetful, and her domestic discipline filled me with guilt at the shambles my life seemed to have become.

The photograph of Rachel was gleaming in its frame. It smelled of Mr Sheen and looked so fresh it might have been a likeness captured only yesterday, not a quarter of a century ago. I could not imagine why Eleanor would want to humour me this way. She

seemed to have a rare gift for caring, for nurturing, for warming the hearts of those around her with her eccentricity and her love. I found her presence comforting and I did not want her to leave.

I lay quiet in bed, weary beyond words, but my mind was still too full of travel for sleep. Then I heard Eleanor come, the delicate padding of her feet upon the stair. I heard the shower, and the chink of all the little bottles she kept upon the shelf and later I heard her padding down the hall to her room. Then I listened, waiting for the familiar swish of her door as it scraped the carpet, waited for a long time, eventually drifting off into a kind of shallow slumber in anticipation of it, only to open my eyes some time later to see her framed in the doorway, her long silhouette backed by the soft amber of the light on the landing. She seemed to stand there for a long while, as if thinking. Then, with a click, the landing light was extinguished and she entered soundlessly, the weight and the warmth of her sliding beneath the duvet and pressing me gently against the wall.

"Eleanor?"

She said nothing but curled into me and laid her head against my shoulder. Her face was wet. I felt it soaking through my tee-shirt but she was quiet, her body perfectly still, the emotion seeming to well up from silent depths.

"Let me stay a while," she said.

I turned and tried to put my arm around her to comfort her, but I felt myself becoming erect. It was an automatic and irksome thing, brought on by her closeness and the breathtaking smoothness of her legs against mine. It might have been all right, except my sex nudged against her thigh and I turned sharply away, mortified, only to feel her slide ever closer into my back, taking up every contour until there was nothing left between us that was not touching.

"Don't go," I said, at once aware of the ambiguity of my words. I'd meant don't leave this house, don't disappear from my life,... not my bed, but it would have spoiled the moment then, to stutter out an explanation, so I lay quiet, trapped against the wall with the firmness of her against my back. Slowly then, she wrapped her arms around my waist and clasped her cool hands upon my chest. I waited for her to speak but she said nothing.

Her presence was a strange anaesthetic, as if her stillness and her melancholy were an infectious thing. I ended up sweeping in and out of consciousness to find her always there, the warm press of

her, the cool and gentle curling of her breath upon my shoulder, the scent of her shampoo and face-cream. Then it was dawn and I woke this time to the sound of her padding down the hall. Slowly then, we began our separate days, and we did not speak of it again.

CHAPTER 30

That evening, I barely had time to shower and change my clothes before Rachel was knocking on my door.

Eleanor rose. "I'll get that then shall I?"

I gave a nod, hanging back deliberately. I wanted her to open the door. I wanted to stand beside her and read her expression when she gazed upon Rachel for the first time. Rachel had driven over directly from the office. She looked smart and cool and businesslike in a dark blue suit, with a short skirt. Eleanor had changed into a long frock, black as usual, but one I hadn't seen before. She had refreshed her lipstick and her hair shone like deep water. Rachel smiled, her eyes widening a little. "Hi," she said.

Conversely, Eleanor's eyes narrowed, an expression I might have read as suspicion, had it not been for the accompanying smile: It was astonishment. "Rachel?"

"Yes. You must be Tom's mum."

"In a manner of speaking."

"Is he coming out to play?"

"Only if you promise to have him home before bedtime."

I saw a hint of colour spreading to Eleanor's cheeks as she realised the possible double meaning in her joke, but Rachel laughed. As I passed her, my overnight bag in my hand, I felt myself blushing too. Eleanor caught my arm and squeezed, then she looked me in the eyes, a long look, drinking me in as if for the last time.

Rachel drove a large and nearly new BMW. At first I felt subdued beside her, cocooned in its quiet interior as we motored through the centre of town. She seemed a world apart from the woman I'd made love to at the weekend. This was an ambitious and dynamic woman,... a career woman, a woman who'd started out on a supermarket till and worked her way up to become the manager of an engineering company.

She had not stood still for a moment since our schooldays. Compared with her, it was as if I had settled into low gear in my twenties and progressed no further in my breadth of view. I was still so narrowly focused, my heart and mind hardly wandering further than the streets of Middleton, or the stale open plan offices at Derby's Diesels. And surely, it was too late to change all of that now. Not for me the BMW, nor the corridors of power in far flung

Paris. These were things I did not want, things I did not really value.

Her house was a renovated, double fronted cottage on Highmoor Lane, a country road that runs across the last stretch of high land before the immensity of the Plain. It was a quiet stretch, with perhaps only half a dozen properties spread out along a mile of road. They were mostly old places, impressive in their outlook and their isolation.

Unaware, I'd passed her place countless times - driven by, walked by, cycled by and turned my head each time to admire the setting of that house, the romance of it, perched upon the crest of a hill, overlooking the Plain. It was stone built, white rendered with fake blue shutters and it was surrounded by well tended gardens. I remembered the gardens in particular. Even in late season, they had always lent a rich focus of colour, and an exotic scent amid the agricultural blandness of the surrounding meadows.

When she led me through the door there were soft colours, soft lights, and a sense of deep cushioned comfort, but a complete lack of fussy ornamentation - not a single piece of china, not a vase, nor keepsake anywhere. Such plainness suited me, but I was a man. I don't know what I had been expecting, but something,... and I found its absence unsettling.

The crowning glory of the house was its conservatory, which she settled me into. They were something of a suburban cliché, with their mock Edwardian styling and their regulation cane furniture, but there on Highmoor it was an inspiration, an impressive glass capsule from which to view the garden and the countryside spread out below. It was dark now and the Plain appeared as a network of amber lights strung out in lines across its expanse. And there were lights gathered into living clusters, like luminous coral, marking the dozens of rural villages which lay between us and the sea.

"Terrific view," I said. "You have a lovely garden too. It must take some keeping up."

"I've no time for the garden to be honest," she said. "I pay someone to look after it for me. You should see the view around dusk. You get the most wonderful sunsets from up here."

"I know. I used to come up a lot. I'd walk by of an evening, when I lived down in Parbold."

"You did?"

"It was usually in the summer after work, when we'd got the kids

into bed,... I'd come up for some air and a bit of peace."

"Do you see much of your children, now?"

"Not much."

"And your house? Have you sold it yet?"

"The last I heard we had a buyer. I guess it'll take a few months for it all to go through."

She tossed her car keys onto the glass top of the coffee table and the sudden clatter made my heart leap.

"It must hurt," she said. "To be so close, and yet not see them."

"Only when I let my guard down."

"When I left my husband, I just ran. We had a nice old place, a farmhouse, but I've never looked back. Not once. I suppose it wouldn't have been so easy if I'd had children, something for ever tying me to the source of the pain. I should be thankful for small mercies, I suppose."

"You've never wanted children? "

She shook her head and I knew she meant it.

"Still, I'm sure it wasn't that easy for you, Rachel."

I was about to ask her what had happened, but that would have been to deliberately mislead her into thinking I knew nothing. Instead, I tried to draw her out with my silence, which I felt was the lesser deception.

"You're right," she said. "It wasn't easy. There are things about me, things in my past that may surprise you." She gave me a concealing smile. "Does that worry you?"

Her tone had seemed playful, so I returned the smile and the tone. "I don't know, should it?"

But I'd misread her. She was serious and seemed to grow very still of a sudden. "How are things between you and Annie?"

"Me and Annie?"

"Am I a temporary diversion, Tom? Six months down the line are you going to end up back with her, for the sake of your children? I'd understand it if you did. Many couples step back from the brink because they're afraid for their children. They patch things up and get by as best they can. I'd rather I knew now if that was a possibility."

"I can't see myself ever getting back with Annie."

"How can you be so sure? It's only a few months since you split."

"Three months," I said. "Which may as well be a lifetime so far as I'm concerned. And losing her didn't hurt so much as I thought it

would, which made me realise we'd lost each other a long time ago. I don't know how it's going to work out with the children. Naturally, it'll never be over between me and them,... but it's definitely over between me and Annie."

She softened a little, and lowered her gaze. "It's just that I've wasted a lot of years on men who weren't serious. Don't get me wrong, I knew what I was doing and it suited me then because I wasn't serious either. But I'm different now. I've no time for that sort of thing any more."

"I know. Look, since breaking up with Annie,... well, the last thing on my mind was getting involved with someone else. But it's happened."

"And now it's happened, what is it you want? Are you after a quick fling? Or something more. Forgive my bluntness but I'm too old for all those teenage guessing games."

"I don't know what our coming together means, Rachel, or where it's going to lead, but you go back such a long way for me, further than Annie, further than anyone I've ever known,... "

"And?.... "

"I suppose what I'm trying to say is I couldn't insult you, or the memory of what you've always meant to me with a,... well, a quick fling."

She swallowed slowly and shook her head. "I believe you. Everything about you tells me it's true. It's just so hard to accept. I knew nothing, felt nothing. All those years. You'd think I would have felt something when you were around."

"It wasn't meant to be. Not then."

"And now? Why now?"

"I don't know."

There came a silence between us, softened by the sudden patter of rain upon the glass. I did not want to speak any more. Words seemed trivial now. I wanted only to gaze at her, to feel her presence and to remember all those times I'd longed for such a moment as this.

Eventually, we moved into the kitchen where she prepared a simple meal of pizza and garlic bread. I watched her as she flitted about the place, gathering utensils and plates and it struck me how nothing seemed planned, nor premeditated.

There were knives and forks and mugs and plates, none of which matched. Nor was there linen, nor dainty napkin rings - nothing

bearing the mark of a bottom drawer, and I began to understand that with Rachel, what you saw was what you got. There was no bottom drawer. She lived on the surface of her being.

"You were right about Eleanor," she said.

"Hmnn?"

"She is very beautiful. And that was a lovely frock she was wearing. Louis Armande, wasn't it?"

"I wouldn't know. Is Louis Armande good?"

"Tom, really!"

"Honestly, I haven't a clue."

"Well, it wasn't off the peg."

"It wasn't? I didn't think Eleanor was into fashion. In fact I'm sure she's not. She sort of goes her own way."

"I could see that. Very Gothic. Anyway I didn't say it was fashion - just quality." There was a significant pause and then: "Will the two of you be staying together do you think?"

"I don't know. She's taken my father's death rather hard and I'm afraid to think of her being on her own." I wondered if that was the right answer. I wondered also how I would have felt if Rachel had been living with a darkly handsome young man who by quirk of fate was her step father. I'd be curious. I'd want to know what they talked about when I wasn't around. I'd want to hear the tone of their voices, and I'd be wondering if they had ever shared a bed, however innocently - if his flesh had touched hers in the night as they had lain together.

She smiled to put me at ease, to lend the impression she wasn't serious when she asked me: "You're sure there's nothing naughty going on?"

Had we been naughty? Had our sleeping together signified a blurring of the boundaries of our already singular relationship? I did not know. I'd found it warm and comforting but entirely sexless. Her hands had not strayed, nor had I willed them to. I had felt her breasts against my back and her mound against my bottom but I had not thought to manoeuvre for advantage. It had been blissful, beautiful. We had been like children.

"No," I said,... You forget, until a month ago, she was my father's wife. I know things may seem a little odd, but that's only because she's so young. If she'd been my father's age, you wouldn't even think to ask."

But then had she been my father's age, would I have submitted

so willingly to the bliss of her presence in my bed?

"I know. But there was something, Tom,... I felt it when she answered the door."

"How do you mean?"

"It was just a look,... something in her eye, in her tone."

"Ah, you mean this way that girls have of weighing each other up at a glance?"

"Something like that. Don't get me wrong, I thought she was lovely, but I also got the feeling I'd better not hurt you,... or else."

"It's complicated. Me and Eleanor,... she's fragile and I do care about her. But we don't think of each other,.... well, you know,... in that way." It sounded a bit lame and I cast about for some way to reassure her. I could have said Eleanor wasn't interested in men, that she was Lesbian, but Rachel would have wanted to know why, if that were true, she'd married my father, and I wasn't ready for a long explanation of Eleanor's impenetrable psyche. "It's just,... complicated,... " I said again.

"I know,... and you seem unsettled by it. But I wouldn't worry. Remember the eighties? Strangers of both sexes would share houses and mortgages, simply because they couldn't afford a home any other way. Or they were speculating on the rise in house prices making them a fortune. It was like a business partnership. No one even batted an eye."

"Well,... I'm not sure this is the same sort of thing."

"I wouldn't worry. If it works why knock it? What about your job? How's that going?"

"I've been offered something in France."

I'd been about to go on and express my doubts in case she thought my plan was to leave her before we'd barely begun to get to know one another, but she seemed delighted.

"Tom! That's wonderful. When do you start?"

"Well, I haven't actually accepted it yet."

"Why not?"

I was puzzled. Could she not see why? "Still thinking about it," I mumbled,... "It's a big step."

"But you have to take it. It's a brilliant opportunity. What's holding you back?"

If I had gone to Paris I would have been on my feet again, but also a long way from her,... and Eleanor, and the children. "Well,... us," I said, thinking to spell it out. "I'd never see you."

"Oh, Tom, that's sweet but it needn't change anything. Paris is only a few hours away. And we can keep in touch between times. There's such a thing as the telephone and e-mail you know. Just think of all those love letters!"

But for all the world's sophistication, for all the ease with which we could launch our disembodied words around the globe, for me, the goal of love was more than to care for someone and be interested in them: it was to actually be *with* them. In love, time apart was just time in pain and longing and loneliness!

I gazed around the house, at the lack of ornamentation and realised for all its softness and its femininity, the entire contents might have been packed in an hour. There was nothing to lend an air of permanence. I might have balked at the prospect of living and working abroad but Rachel would not have thought twice. She could have cleared out at a moment's notice.

"You'll stay the night? " she asked.

"Of course," I replied, and for a moment I wished I could have travelled back in time, transported myself into the passenger seat beside that lovelorn teenager as he drove his knackered old Midget down Langholm Avenue.

"It's okay," I would have told him. "It all works out. Twenty five years from now you'll have your chance. You'll be with Rachel, and she'll be asking you to stay the night."

I should have felt myself floating. I should have felt like carving our names into the bark of a tree, but the teenager who was me turned to the middle aged chap beside him, who was also me, and shook his head, for now I believe he saw the world more clearly than I,... and in his eyes there was reflected a trace of pity.

CHAPTER 31

I returned home the following evening, walking in to find Eleanor, a black lotus blossom upon the floor of the lounge, her dress having ridden carelessly up her thighs to reveal the black vee of her pants.

"Tom,... what time is it? I wasn't expecting you."

She shook her head, as if waking from a deep sleep, then remembering herself she drew her knees together and smoothed the dress over them. She had her back to the wall and she was listening to music, a trail of tears streaming down, but she recovered quickly, wiping her eyes on the backs of her hands. She had a strange look about her, I thought, somehow stoned and crumpled as if she'd flopped there last night after I'd gone and had been there ever since.

"Eleanor, are you okay?"

"Elgar," she said. "Only Elgar."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure." Then came the smile, the mask she wore. "Rachel seemed nice."

"Yes."

"So why the long face?"

"Oh,... I don't know. Just something,... Anyway - never mind that. I think we need to talk."

Her eyes flickered in alarm, as keenly as if I'd brandished a knife. "Later," she said and then, evasively: "Have you eaten? I wish you'd 'phoned. I could have had something ready."

"I'm fine. Listen, it's important." I sat down before her, tucking my stiff legs beneath me and rubbing my temples, trying to order my thoughts,... thoughts that came racing and rattling one after the other. "If I go to Paris, will you come?"

She looked as if she thought she had not heard properly, shook her head to clear her ears. "Say that again."

"The apartment's quite big,... two big bedrooms, I'm told,... and men and women share houses all the time, don't they? Remember the eighties?"

She closed her eyes,... screwed them tight as if to shut me out. "Tom, think about what you're saying."

"It wouldn't be a problem. You'd be doing me a favour, because otherwise the company would try to get me to share the place with Stavros or one of the other blokes - and I couldn't think of anything

worse."

"You know I can't, Tom."

"But why not? Explain it to me."

"Our living here is one thing, going away together is quite another."

"I don't see how."

"Just circumstances, that's all."

"Circumstances?"

"Neither of us planned this. In a way, that makes it okay, but if I come with you, then we've made a choice. We've made a choice to be together. Do you understand that?"

"But if I stay here that's just the same, isn't it?"

She covered her face. "That's why I've got to go. It's what I keep telling you and you're not listening. I have to go, Tom. I,... have,... .to,... go,..."

I'd been so anxious to straighten things out but now, after only a few words, I seemed to have pushed things to the point of being irreparably broken. I gazed at her in disbelief, as if gazing at a fragile vase I'd carelessly let slip through my fingers. It was lying in pieces on the floor and the vase was everything that she meant to me. "You can't. Where would you go?"

"Does it matter?"

"Please Eleanor, don't do anything hasty."

She closed herself off, then rallied, coming back at me with an accusing thrust: "So, you're going to Paris?"

"Eh,... I don't know."

"But you sounded so sure. Have you told Rachel?"

"She thinks I should go."

Eleanor was surprised. "She's coming with you? Things are getting serious. I'd no idea! Oh, Tom, you should go easy. I know you feel like you've known her all your life but think about it from her angle: you're a guy she's only just met. She's coming on so strong, like she's drunk on the idea of you having loved her all this time. How long will it last? Maybe you ought to hold off a little - you're still in shock, I mean over Annie and everything. And your dad. We're both missing your dad."

"Hang on,... you're jumping ahead a bit. She's not coming with me. At least,... well, I don't suppose she would. I don't know, I haven't asked her. Everything seems to be happening at the wrong time for us. You're saying I'm making a fool of myself, that it won't

last?"

"I don't know. I'm just saying go easy."

"And I will, but you and me,... we're friends." It sounded lame but I didn't know what else to say to reinforce it. So, we were friends; so what? We should stick together? But friends were the first to come unglued when lives changed, when the world moved everyone on and only lovers took a firm grip of one another's hands, only lovers stood firm, heads down into the wind.

She reached out and took hold of my arm, but it was not a tender gesture. She squeezed hard, as if in warning. "I'm not like other women, Tom. You know that. It would be dangerous for you, for us both, if we went away together."

"More dangerous than us being together now? I don't get it, Eleanor,.... really I don't."

She reached up and sank her fingers into my shoulders, sank them deep, their black tips pressing almost to the point of pain. She said nothing, but simply looked at me from beneath dark brows, her eyes unblinking, her mind made up.

"Eleanor, come to Paris with me. It'll be fun. "

She shook her head and I tried to think of another tack, but could feel myself becoming hopelessly bogged down. It seemed with every word, I was only making matters worse. "Can we wind this conversation back? Better still can we forget everything we've talked about, and start again?"

"You need to eat," she said. "There's some roast chicken left over from yesterday,..."

And I thought, okay: Roast chicken; breathing space; time to backtrack, to cool off. "I'll take a shower first,... I'm sorry if I've upset you."

"It's all right. You mean well. But there's a lot you don't know."

"So explain it."

"No."

"But,..."

She put up her hand to stop me. "Please, Tom, just leave me alone. Okay? You're not being fair."

I felt her voice hovering on the edge of anger. I felt its bite, felt it tearing away little strips of my flesh. The confusion, the hurt - it was like a spike, and I was impaled upon it, unable to move without compounding the bitter ache. It was exactly like I remembered life with Annie,... the feeling I should have been smarter, that I was for

ever letting her down in ways she would never explain. But it wasn't my fault, and I was suddenly angry for being placed once more in such an impossible situation, an emotional trap with her foot on the door and no other means of escape. I drew away quietly, averting my eyes, unable to look at her, not wanting her to see my anger. Then, slowly, quietly, I carried my hurt upstairs to run a shower and lose myself in its steam.

It was just a tiff, I thought, as I felt myself calming down. We'd be all right. I'd give it an hour, then make some tea and say I was sorry. She'd smile and give me a playful poke in the arm,... then I'd suggest a blast over the moors with the top down, perhaps a drink at the Black Horse. Sure, everything would be fine.

I was in the shower for ten minutes. Then I stepped out and groped for a towel but the rail was empty. This was odd because I'd placed one there in readiness, before running the shower. Puzzled, I turned, squinting through soap stung eyes, to see Eleanor sitting on the edge of the bath, wearing a long black robe, holding the towel to her cheek. This was not a fantasy, not a figment come to explain itself through the channels of my own imagination. It was Eleanor: flesh and blood, regarding me strangely.

Nor was it an accident, an innocent blunder to be dismissed with laughter and blushes. She'd been sitting there waiting, perhaps to continue our conversation, I thought.

"Look, I'll just get a towel, okay." I backed away, reaching for the door but she held up the key for me to see. She'd locked it, locked me in with her - obviously not to guard our privacy but to prevent my escape.

"Don't be afraid," she said, but that she should have said such a thing made me suddenly very afraid indeed.

"Eleanor you're still upset. Why don't we go out for a meal or something? You've not been out for ages. You need to get out of this house."

Her eyes lit up, offering a glimmer of hope, until I saw the maniacal glint in them. This was the dangerous side: her dark side. "A meal?" she mocked. "By candlelight, perhaps? How lovely! But no, I don't think so. People might get the wrong idea. And besides, I have something to show you." She rose and shrugged off the robe to reveal her pale body, still in black bra and pants. She twirled slowly and I saw a slender black string between shapely buttocks, a mole in the dimple of her thigh.

Turning to face me once more, she gave a saucy wink, then slid the key down the front of her pants and slipped her straps so her breasts spilled from their cups,... pendulous,... and momentarily quite mesmerising.

"Give me your hands," she said.

"Definitely not."

"Your hands Tom. Don't cover yourself like that. I want to see you."

She did not wait but took my hands in hers and drew them apart with a determination I could not resist without a deliberate show of my own strength - and I could not do that, could not react towards Eleanor with anything akin to force or violence. "I want to see if my shape arouses you," she said. "Ah,..." She feigned mock pleasure. "I see it does, and so quickly! Tom,... really - you ought to be ashamed! And me your stepmother. What a naughty boy you are."

Sure enough, I was betrayed by a growing erection. But it was not her, I told myself, it was just her shape, her undeniably arousing shape and the stupid male reflex that could not discern between right and wrong. I thought it was over now, that she had proved her point, whatever that point was, but then I watched in stunned silence as she seesawed her pants down. The key loosened from their minuscule folds fell to the floor with an ominous clatter.

"Look, Eleanor, this is wrong. I don't think of you this way."

"You might not think it," she said. "But you could obviously do it."

"Is that what you're afraid of? That I might expect it if we went away together? But I would never; I know you can't;... and anyway, even if you could, I know you prefer girls."

She raised herself to her full height and moved closer so I could feel the heat pouring out of her. I was backed up hard against the bathroom door, nowhere to turn, nowhere to run, nowhere to go except through Eleanor. I was horrified. I could not bear to see her like this.

"I didn't say that! You know I didn't say that. Is that what you've been thinking? That I'm a Lesbian?"

"What else was I supposed to think? You've been with girls,... you said so."

"It doesn't make me a Lesbian, Tom."

"Whatever it makes you, this still means nothing. You don't understand men. We're capable of having sex with any woman - any

woman! It's the way we're made. It doesn't always mean we want to. And I could never,.. not with you. Now please, cover yourself up. Don't spoil the way it is between us."

She took hold of me then, slid her fingers beneath my shaft, and curled her thumb around it, clamping me firmly in her fist. "Are you really saying you'd never want to?"

My lungs convulsed, letting out a sharp gasp. "Stop it. I can't take that. I can't take it. I can't take it,...."

"Answer me."

"For pity's sake. You don't always need sex to be close. We've slept together. Held each other all night. How close is that?"

"It didn't happen," she said. "It was impossible."

"It happened. It was innocent. It was good."

"Maybe, but not enough for you. What you need is a straight, no nonsense lover." As she spoke, she began to draw her hand upon me dangerously. "Everyone needs a lover." She gave me a thin smile, a sinister smile, a closer look at her dark side, and it was repulsive, but her hand worked me expertly and in a way that made me ashamed to admit the dangerous pleasure of it.

"You wouldn't be safe with me," she said. "I don't know what you think they did to me down there but everything still works. Why not slip inside and I'll show you. It might be good - one time, two times,.. maybe three, but I haven't the constancy to be anyone's lover for very long. Pretty soon, and for no reason, I'll freeze you out, leave you cold and wondering what you've done to upset me. I'll,... drive,... you,... cra-zy. Drive,... you,... cra-zy. Drive,... you,... "

It was not intended - the rhythm of her hand was merely incidental to her words, her mood and my trigger was mechanical, not emotional. I closed my eyes, swallowed hard, and ejaculated copiously. I heard her gasp in surprise, saw my seed upon her wrist, her leg and I crumpled over in shock, in shame.

She seemed to shrink and her mood change. Indeed she seemed suddenly quite sober. "Tom! I didn't mean that to happen." She covered herself and turned away, then knelt and fumbled for the key, holding it out with a trembling hand for me to take. I saw only fear and horror in her eyes, where moments ago there had been such sinister fire.

I looked at the key as she waved it urgently before me. No. I was unable to touch it, so charged it seemed with her heat and I was afraid it would burn me. I managed only to shake my head. What

was she saying? She was not frigid? Was not lesbian? Was she warm and moist, I wondered? Or was she cold and dry? Might she have been stimulated by the rhythm of a gently persuasive hand?

My God! My God! What had happened here?

As I knelt before her, I saw the dark hair of her mound and I felt an involuntary tingling in my palm, as if in anticipation of its texture. I snatched my eyes away, shut them, screwed them tight. The night we had spent together had been a wonder for its innocence, an innocence made possible only by the fact that I'd imagined a part of her was missing. I could never look at her again and feel the same after this. We could never be like children now.

She was a woman, like any other,....

I felt a terrible heat in my face and I realised I was crying.

"Tom. I'm so sorry."

"It's nothing,... only Elgar."

She wrapped the towel around my waist, then threw her arms around me, holding me, cradling me but my blind erection lunged at her, a blunt and stupid instrument that stopped her from coming as close as I needed. "You see?" she said. "You see what I can be like now?"

"It's not your fault."

"How can you say that? How can you be so forgiving?"

"I wanted nothing from you."

And with those words, the gulf of my understanding yawned once more between us. She released me, dropped me almost and drew her robe about her. Then she unlocked the door and made to leave, but turned briefly, angry once more. "What about me?" she said. "What about what I want?" Then she ran down the hall to her room and slammed the door behind her.

It was a little after seven,.. still early, but I sank into bed, wearing the shame of my thoughts like a scar. She had sought to frighten me and had succeeded in fair measure, but in doing so had destroyed the thing between us I valued most of all. It had suited me to think of her as being sexless, as being frigid, or Lesbian for it had enabled me to draw closer to her without the inevitable distraction of desire. But now, how easily I could imagine the heat of her sex in my palm! How easily I could imagine massaging away her frigidity and curing all her ills in that peculiarly masculine way, by having her feel the measure of me inside of her, by releasing her sweetness, by having her moan and scream and cry, until I'd

crushed and sweated an orgasm out of her,...

....out of Eleanor.

CHAPTER 32

I was ill-prepared for the following morning which began earlier than expected and with a sensation of misery in my guts that was something akin to a hangover. I was usually the first to rise on a work morning, being on the road by seven thirty, long before Eleanor had stirred. But that morning I woke to the sound of the shower and her footsteps padding softly down the hall.

Thinking I'd overslept I snatched up my watch. It was only six. Normally, there would have been an hour before I'd needed to move, but I was staying with Rachel again that night and I would need to sort out a bag, perhaps iron a couple of shirts. I was dressing when Eleanor came in with coffee. She was careful to avert her eyes and after setting the cup down she raised her hands and backed away.

"Peace offering," she said.

"Gratefully accepted. Thank you."

"Last night was awful. I'm sorry Tom. I haven't slept for thinking about it."

"Me neither."

"You must hate me."

"No. I love you. Without condition, as surely as I love my children."

Her eyes flashed and I fancied I saw in them a moment of confusion, of alarm. "You know what I mean," I said, quickly. "Now let's just forget last night ever happened." It was a stupid thing to say, because we both knew neither of us were ever likely to.

She noticed I'd turned Rachel's picture down and made to set it back up again.

"Leave it," I said.

She looked at me and slowly the bottomless Eleanor stare grew tender with long, slow movements of her lashes. "But it's such a lovely picture," she said.

"A little dated now, I think."

"She hasn't changed that much."

She came to me then, hung herself from my shoulders and hugged me. I clung to her in the hope it would set us back on the road to where we had been before, but it was too late, for even as we hugged, I was aware of the corruption in the press of her breasts

and in the curve of her hip beneath my palms.

"Don't think about me, too much," she said. "The best we can ever be is survivors, both of us clinging to the same life-raft. And that's no way to live. Be happy, Tom. This girl can make you happy."

"This girl won't be coming with me."

"Then stay. Be near her. Don't go to France."

"The job in France is what I know. I couldn't earn a quarter of what I'm earning now doing anything else. Rachel's right, I'd be crazy to ignore the chance."

"Since when did money mean anything to you?"

"It's not just the money. It's what I know."

"Then it sounds as if you've made up your mind."

"I'd go for sure if you'd come with me."

She pushed herself away. "That's not fair! Why are you so intent on it?"

"I want,... I want to always be able to make sure you're okay. I know you can be,.... fragile."

"You make me sound like a piece of old porcelain. Are you afraid I'll fall apart?"

"I wouldn't want that to happen. I'd die if you did and I'd done nothing to prevent it."

"Tom, you really don't get it do you? If it happens, it happens and it'll make no difference if I'm alone or surrounded by friends. Sometimes, I get the darkest of moods and they frighten me, not just for myself, but because I know what it's like for those around me, for those who have to deal with me."

"You've not been like that for years."

"I know and they've been good years but it won't last. It never does. One morning, someone will find me with my wrists cut, or my neck in a noose, and I don't want it to be you."

"Don't even joke about it! I want to take care of you. But you've got to help me to help you. And you can do that by coming with me."

"What would Rachel think? Carol only saw us together for a moment and it ruined everything for you. Are you blind, Tom? "

"Rachel would be okay. She understands."

"She might say that now, but she doesn't mean it. And what would I be? Your housekeeper? Your mother? Your frigid lover? The one you sleep with when Rachel's not around?"

"Who cares about finding the right label? You'd be,... Eleanor. If you were a bloke it wouldn't be a problem. Why does it have to be a problem? "

"Don't be so naive. Things aren't that simple between us." She lowered head and began to walk away. "If you must know the truth," she said. "I can't go on being a friend to you any more."

I felt as if she'd cut my legs from under me. "But,... what have I done?"

"Nothing. You've done nothing. Don't be so,... childish."

"Childish?... but how else do expect me to take it? There has to be something."

"It's nothing to do with you. It's me. It's all me."

She walked out then, closing herself off in her room while I made myself ready for work. I felt wretched. What had she meant? What had I done? I was afraid of us parting on bad terms, so before I left I tried knocking on her door. " Eleanor, please. Let's not leave it like this,... "

But there was no reply and I turned away my heart aching with the strain of such a sudden and terrible rejection. Then, as I was leaving, pulling the car away from the kerb, she appeared and tapped on the window. I wound it down and she leaned in to kiss my cheek, then stroked it with the back of her hand. I looked at her thinking she'd say something but without a word she simply turned and walked slowly back inside.

When I arrived at the office, I sought my desk in silence, eyes carefully averted to avoid contact with my colleagues who were huddled deep in conspiracy, discussing our imminent demise, embellishing the already outrageous rumours: Derby's was to be demolished to make way for new supermarket, Derby's was to be taken over by an American corporation old Whacker had an interest in, stripped of its assets and then demolished for housing - no, the local MP had kicked up a fuss - Derby's was safe. The only true thing about any of it though was that none of it was true.

Fred Arbuckle approached me and pressed a piece of yellow card into my hand.

"What's this then, Fred?"

He winked. "Ticket to a dance."

I looked at it. The card bore just the one hyphenated word: "Re-dun-dance."

It was becoming rather a worn out joke by this time. I was not

in the mood for gallows humour, nor idle speculation on events I had no power to influence. The whole business of winding down had already gone on too long. I wished the bulldozers would just sweep the place away and leave us in peace. All I could think of was Eleanor and the way she had looked at me that morning. I could still feel the cool of her hand upon my cheek and the awful weight of the words she had not spoken. I calmed myself with coffee, then sat down to think a while before picking up the telephone.

"Eleanor?"

"Yes?"

"It's Tom."

"I know. What's up?"

"Nothing. Are you okay?"

"Sure. You checking on me?"

"I suppose I am."

"There's no need."

"I know, but,..."

"But what?"

"Things,... they're different. There's a distance come between us now and it hurts."

"I know. Me too. But there's no going back."

"What about forward? How do we put this right? We have to put this right, Eleanor!"

"There's only one way to do that," she said.

"Eleanor, please don't go. Promise me we'll talk. Tomorrow night. I'll be back tomorrow night."

"What time?"

"Straight after work - about five."

"Fancy a stew for your tea? "

"Sure. I'll bring a bottle of wine. We have to work something out."

"Say, hello to Rachel for me. Goodbye, Tom."

She hung up. Things sounded better and I felt a little more at ease, knowing she would at least be there. All I had to do now was think of something to say that would make her change her mind.

Later, I was standing in the assembly hall watching a couple of fitters as they put the finishing touches to the last of our diesel engines. I was impressed, as always, by the care they took, but in regarding them my eyes were merely resting, mesmerised by their

movements while my mind played back the events of the past twenty four hours.

I could still feel the profound shock of Eleanor's nudity, her potent shape, her heat, her scent,... and inevitably the touch of her hand has she had stroked me. It must be human nature to resist change even up to the last minute when a revolution is unavoidable and imminent and when the warnings are all around you. In truth, I had wanted to live the rest of my life in my father's house with the sound of Eleanor padding down the hall every morning. I had wanted to be in her easy company, while at the same time exploring all that was extraordinary about Rachel. I had wanted to earn my living in the quiet back water of Derby's dilapidated factory - except now, even here in the assembly hall, the harbingers of change were unavoidable.

There was an eerie quiet where once there had been an infernal roar. Now the ring of a spanner echoed loud in the emptiness, and all around the lights were going out. In six months this engine and its mate would be powering a ferry in the Baltic. It would have to run for decades without complaint, long after we who had brought it into being had passed into oblivion. By then this shed would be derelict. The cups would have huddled around the dusty kettles and the drawings which bore memory to this beast's miraculous intricacy would have dissolved into the oily puddles on the floor.

Change was coming. I could not think of Eleanor without thinking of her touch, without seeing the heavy breasts with their dark tips, the milky white of her skin and the long cascade of black hair. I could not live with her any more and think such thoughts. We could not dine together by candle light, nor drink wine and laugh without my eyes resting on the voluptuous curves beneath the black cloth of her dress and wanting to see her again as I had seen her last night. I had to persuade her to stay,... to remain safe in my father's house where she belonged, but also I had to go and the only place left for me was Paris.

CHAPTER 33

By mid afternoon, I was clock watching, my eyes inexorably drawn to the giant dial of the Smiths clock suspended at the far end of the office. It had kept time there for decades,... the good years, the boom years and now seemed intent on drawing out our decline as if to punish us for our incompetence. It was not a good sign and the day seemed set to be interminable. Then the telephone rang.

"To.., I kno.. you.. work..g but I really ne..d ..ou to come. Can you meet me?"

The line was bad, a lot of chopping and fading - a mobile near a dead zone. I took a guess. "Eleanor?"

There was a pause. A clearing of the line. "No,... it's Annie."

"Annie,... if this is about the house?...."

"House! F..ck th.. h..se! It's Stevie. He's ha.. a.. accident. I'm a... th... h.pi..tal. Casu...lty."

Stevie! An accident! Hospital! Mind focused, car keys in hand. "I'll be right there," I said.

It wasn't serious. He'd ridden his bike into a wall and cut his head. I might have done the same myself at his age and my father would not have turned a hair, simply slapped a plaster on and sent me to lie down for a bit. They were just coming out of casualty when I arrived, breathless and giddy with anxiety.

"Look, Daddy. Stitches!"

"Ah,.. very pretty. Gemmie's going to want some when she sees those."

I hadn't heard his voice in weeks. I knelt down to hug him and at once there rose the threat of tears - mine, not his, but they were squeezed away and swallowed down with all my strength before I faced Annie.

She looked cool. "I'm sorry," she said. "I thought we'd be ages. I wanted you to stay with him while I picked Gemmie up from school." She began to walk away from me. "Come on Stevie."

I didn't understand. "Is that it then?"

"What?" She glanced at her watch. "Look, I've got to be at the school gates in twenty minutes. I thought you were never going to get here."

"I came as quickly as I could. Why didn't you say? I could have gone straight to school for her myself."

"I don't like you driving Gemmie around in that old thing, it's not safe."

"What? But that's absurd. What am I doing here then?"

"I thought I needed you."

"And now you don't? But I've just walked out of work, without a word to anyone - I thought you were,... desperate."

She thought for a moment, thought perhaps about telling me she didn't need me any more,.... thought twice for some reason and softened a little. "Why not go round to the house? Wait for me. Have you still got your key?"

I hadn't spoken to her in months, and now her tone,... brisk and business like. It was as if nothing had happened. "Is that,.. convenient? I mean, I don't want to bump into Alistair or anything."

"Alistair won't be there."

She walked on, dragging Stevie behind. "It's up to you."

Take it or leave it, she was saying. Sure, I went, but only to spend an hour or so with the children, and as drove, I could already feel my heart tightening in anticipation of our parting. It was strange, letting myself into the house, like rediscovering a part of me I had forgotten, or like bumping into an old girlfriend, years later and feeling none of that former emotion.

The yellow textured paper in hall, the bottle green carpet at thirty quid a square meter plus VAT - all of it summoned up memories of a former self, and though it was just six months ago it was a self I no longer recognised, nor cared for any more. I had been living in a vacuum and had it not been for Annie's infidelity, I would have spent the rest of my life worshipping at this shrine, these worthless things, this sad house,.... this loveless life. I had thought it was as good as things were ever likely to get, and it frightens me now, the ease with which we can deceive ourselves. This, above all else, was Annie's legacy.

I was puzzled. Was there something she had not told me? And why, suddenly, was she so relaxed about my being there alone? Was she not afraid I'd run off with the TV and the sofa? I sank into that sofa, sank into its luxurious cushions and checked my watch. Whatever happened, I told myself, whatever was said, I would be out of there by six and with Rachel by a quarter past.

"You look very smart," said Annie, when she finally arrived. "Is that a new suit? Since when did you wear a suit to work? Have you

been promoted?"

"Well I,..."

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy. Look at me! Look at me!"

"Yes, Stevie. Don't pick at your stitches, okay? There's a good lad."

"So, Tom, how have you been?"

"Mummy, Mummy, Mummy. Stevie's done a poo!"

"Oh, Stevie Have you?"

"Done a poo. Done a poo."

"Tom, see to it, would you?"

"What?"

"I've got to start their tea."

"Okay, come on then, Stevie."

It was another thing I had forgotten, the pace of life with young children,... the endless demanding of attention, the endless, jarring interruptions making it impossible to communicate with one another on a meaningful level. All I could recall about Annie at such times was how tired she'd looked. And when at last the kids were packed off to bed and finally had the chance to talk, it seemed neither of us in the end could be bothered. One had no choice under those circumstance but to take it on trust that the other was all right,... only somewhere along the way, I had lost her.

At five thirty, I found myself alone with her in the kitchen, the kids settled in front of the TV. Even a rare appearance by an estranged father took second place it seemed to the video player and the ritual of endless cartoons until bed time. I felt uncomfortable with Annie and couldn't stop thinking of how intimate we had once been, of the things we had done and said and shared. All gone now,... things that might never have happened, the bowl tipped over,... the memories trodden into dirt.

"Is your Dad all right then?" I asked her.

"Fine."

"Your sister?"

"Okay. She's expecting again."

And that was about the level of it. She looked good I thought, looked better than I remembered in a long time. Her skin seemed smoother and there was more life, more shine in her hair. Alistair had given her what I could not, I thought - a reason to shine and it made me feel worthless. I glanced again at my watch. Time to push off, I thought. "When does he get home then?"

She gave a careless shrug but did not reply.

"I'll try to be mature about it," I went on, pointlessly. "I mean I've got to accept him, haven't I? I don't suppose we'll ever be mates exactly but at least civil. That's the best way isn't it? It'll just make things harder otherwise." For want of somewhere to rest my eyes, I looked at my watch again. Quarter to six. "Better be going. Thanks for letting me see the kids."

"I'm not with Alistair any more," she said.

She fixed me quite coldly, arms folded and she leaned against the door frame, seeming to bar my escape, challenging a response. "We've split up. Are you pleased?"

"I don't know. I'm a little surprised." Except I wasn't. Eleanor had predicted it, only I hadn't expected it so soon. "What happened?" But I didn't care. There was no time to unravel it. I'd moved on, soothed the tenderness, closed off the areas most damaged.

"He couldn't cope with the kids," she said.

"That's understandable, I suppose. Does he have any of his own?"

"No. He wasn't that keen on children, when it came down to it."

"They're a shock to the system if you're not used to them."

It seemed simple enough then: Man called Alistair, wide arse, faded three-series Beamer, falls for leggy blonde,... blonde kicks husband out, but children get in way of unbridled passion,... Alistair moves on, seeking next leggy blonde, this time without adult baggage. Bastard!

And here I was, making excuses for him.

Then I began to wonder about the way she'd invited me in, the way I'd slipped seamlessly back into the chaos, placating the children, changing nappies, finding the right video, the one they were both happy to watch, jollying them along. Husband slinks home,... happy to forgive and forget?

"Now, wait just a minute, Annie."

She read my mind and laughed. "I don't want you back," she said. "Is that what you were thinking?"

I bridled. "Back? What do you mean back? It was you who left me, remember? Or rather kicked me out so you could be with him."

I took a deep breath. No, this was not the time to have the row I should have had with her six months ago. It was five minutes to six. "I've really got to go," I said.

"I want the house."

Now we were getting somewhere. "I thought that was all settled.

I thought the contract was going through. Fifty fifty we said."

"They've backed out."

"Since when?"

"Since I took it off the market last week. I need the house. It's for the children. It's the family home, and I'm already living here. My solicitor says I've a good chance if it should go to court, which it will if you don't agree."

"I can't talk about this right now, Annie. I'll call you tomorrow. Or better still, what the hell: Okay, you're right. It's yours."

"Don't get smart with me."

"No, I mean it. Just sort it out - whichever way you want it."

She looked stunned.

"What?" I said. "What's the matter? "

Could she not see? I wanted shut of the problem. I wanted to get out, and the easiest way was simply to agree. She didn't understand how tired I was, how petty it all seemed and she started looking for logical motives in places where logic didn't come into at all. Then I saw her eyes glow as she fastened upon something. It was clearly a revelation. "I know your game," she said.

"Annie, I've no time for this now. I've really got to go."

"You're shagging Eleanor!"

It came out of the blue, a hot knife slashing across my face. Ugly word: shag. Trivialising,... derogatory,.... and not true. It was also a sensitive subject for reasons Annie could never have guessed in a million years.

"Don't," I said.

She gave a mock shudder. "I always thought there was something strange about you and her. You were always too chummy. The way she looks at you,.... it used to make me sick."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I wonder what they'd think about you and her in court. I mean, you living with another woman. It doesn't paint you in a very sympathetic light, does it? How long has it been going on? Years I'll bet. No wonder I found myself another fella."

"That's all rubbish."

"Still, the onus is always on the man to prove he's blameless."

Blameless? No, I wasn't blameless. I had a lover,... only it wasn't Eleanor. "But you started this. You can't twist it round and pin it on me now. You've nothing to gain by dragging Eleanor into it,.... making up some story about us. You've got the house, you've got

custody of the children. You've got everything you had before, but without my irritating presence. What else could you possibly want? Now, please,... leave Eleanor alone. You know what she's like,... she's fragile."

"Weird you mean,..."

"....and I don't want her dragging into it. It's not fair. She's been a good friend these past months, but that's all. It would upset her to hear you saying these things. She doesn't deserve it."

"Don't you ever wonder what people are thinking? You can't see it, but I can. Now your dad's gone, she'll be after her next meal ticket. Wake up, Tom!"

I closed my eyes, not daring to speak until the anger had simmered down a little. Eleanor was blameless. What was it about her, I wondered, that made her such an easy target?

"If people gossip, it's up to them," I said. "But they wouldn't know the truth if it hit them in the face. If you must know, I'll be staying with her until some time in the New Year. Then I'll be going away. I'll let you know my new address when I'm settled."

"Oh?" She tried to sound casual but my words had nudged her off her poisonous track and now she was curious. "Going away?"

"Derby's is shutting, you see."

"It is?" She was surprised.

"You haven't heard?"

"No! Tom,... you've been there for years!" She turned away and drummed her fingers slowly upon the work top, thinking, holding back from saying she was sorry;... sorry about Derby's, sorry about the way she'd spoken,.... sorry about sleeping with Alistair.

"I've been offered something in France."

"France? You?" She didn't sound convinced.

"Why not? It seems the best thing all round."

"I suppose so. But the children,...."

"I know. I'll miss them,..." It was nothing, I told myself. I'd manage. So would they. People did it all the time. "There'll be holidays,... you could bring them over."

But I knew how things would be - both of us always too busy and if I saw them more than half a dozen times in the next ten years I'd be lucky. Before long Gemmie would be sixteen and on the pill,... and I would not know her. Even a week is like a lifetime to a growing child and faces not often there are soon faded out.

Just then, Gemmie came in, shuffling slowly, probing the

atmosphere between us. She gave me a soft look, laid her head in my lap and at once I began to melt.

"Tell me a story, Daddy?"

Her hair fell soft against my hand. I had forgotten the touch of it, like being brushed by downy feathers. "I can't, Gemmie. I've got to go, sweetheart."

"Aw,... please,..." She cuddled closer, hiding her face.

"You could stay a while if you like" said Annie and as she spoke, she gave me a smile. It was lukewarm, but tending towards sympathy. A strange smile, I thought, and it made me wonder if, for all her words, for all her irrational poison, she was telling me we might eventually patch things up if I played my cards right.

It crossed my mind,... a flash of light, a picture of the way things could be. We could make the right noises,... say the right things - perhaps not now but in the coming months. And if I put as much effort into it as I had put into finding Rachel, then there had to be a good chance of us returning to normal. The carpet at thirty quid a square meter could be mine again, my feet snug once more beneath her table, the only damage being two whacking great solicitor's bills. Except, of course,... I couldn't.

It was not a question of forgiving her, for try as I might I had never been able to bring myself to hate her in the first place. From the very beginning, I had shared the blame, a sense of having played my part, of having chosen to sleep at a time when I should have been more vigilant. I had lived a dream,... and now the dream was broken. I did not blame her, but I could no longer trust her with the blind, unconditional trust of love. There would be no going back for us.

I glanced again at my watch. Five past six, now. If I burned rubber I might still make it in time. Ten minutes to Rachel and Highmoor and broad horizons,... of sex until dawn, of Mediterranean beaches and long distance love, and emotions aroused by the merest glance or the poise of a hand. "Next time," I said, gently easing Gemmie's head from my lap. "I'll read you a story next time."

But I'd no idea when the next time would be. It was a weak subterfuge and Gemmie saw through it, treating me to a sulky look, and a jutting lip. It hurt because she was my child and I did not want her to be sad. "Saturday night then," I promised. "You can stay with me and Witchipoo - if that's all right with mummy."

There was a flicker of interest, the lips parted in anticipation. "Really?"

But I saw the flash in Annie's eyes, and knew it was far from being all right. Or perhaps it might have been, had I not put her on the spot like that, turned the emotional floodlight onto her. Gemmie was on tip toes, tugging at my arm, demanding confirmation. "Promise, Daddy? Promise?"

I looked to Annie for help, but she shrugged and turned away, a cruel smile on her lips. She would not make it easy, would not say: "Of course it's all right," but chose silence and the petty revenge of my discomfort.

"Got to go now sweetie. I'll call you."

I prised myself free and walked out leaving a teary tantrum in my wake. It flayed the hide off my back: a promise broken,... while Annie took the emotional high ground, the sympathy, the comforting hug,... a complex game unfolding,... me and Annie, with the children in the middle. No winners, only losers.

I sank inside the tatty sanctuary of the Midget, spilling tears for the second time in twenty four hours. For want of distraction, I fished the telephone from my pocket and switched it on. It scanned sluggishly for a connection then bleeped in accusation - not there when you were needed: message from Rachel.

"Hi, Tom. Hope you get this in time. Don't go to the house. I'm running late. Can you meet me at the factory? Something's come up. See you."

No need to rush then. I could have gone back inside, smoothed things over with Gemmie,... read her the bloody story, then driven to Skelmersdale with a clear conscience. But this was something I wasn't going to solve in a day with a few placatory words. This was a lifetime's work yet to begin, and the best I could hope was that neither of my children would grow up hating me.

CHAPTER 34

The door to Rachel's office still bore the pony tail's name, but when I walked in I could see she'd made herself at home. Dark suited, she looked at ease behind the desk, her head laid back in the deep leather chair as she studied a handful of papers. Not everyone was cut out to be a manager of people, I thought. For all the supposed rewards, the demands were heavy and I had always been happy for others to try their hand instead of me. But this was what she wanted and I sensed she would be good at it - even handed and sympathetic to people's feelings, yet firm and forthright when the need arose.

"Thanks for coming," she said. "Is everything all right? You look like you've had a fright."

I guessed my hair must have been standing on end, so I smoothed it flat and sank down in the swivel chair facing her. "I've just come from Annie's, that's all."

"Problem?"

"Not really. At least it needn't be. The chap she was with has dumped her. "

Rachel gave a sigh and looked away. "And now she wants you back. "

"No. She just wants the house. I said she could have it."

"Was that,... wise?"

"I don't know. Hawksworth will probably have a fit, but I'm happier knowing she'll be there,... that the kids won't be uprooted."

"Always supposing she can afford the mortgage on her own."

"I'm guessing her dad will just pay off what's owed. He’s rolling in it. She'll be fine."

She gave me a pointed look and I held up my hands in surrender. "I know,... then she'll sell it, keep whatever profit there is, and move in with her parents,... I'll be out of pocket by about a hundred thousand. I know,... I'm just tired of the confrontation. I want to move on."

She smiled, perhaps not understanding but at least not criticising. "Any news about France?" she asked.

"I'm still thinking about it. But you're right,... it's probably the best thing."

She laid the papers on the desk and came around, then leaned

back, arms folded, studying me. "You don't sound so certain."

I gazed down at her shoes,... blue shoes, school shoes,... balancing on the sides of her feet. I remembered white calf length socks and silver buckles. I smelled dusty corridors and floor polish, heard the thunder of feet in the stair wells. "I'd rather be nearer to home, if I'm honest."

"But what is there that's so important here any more? I mean with your father gone, and your divorce going through,..."

"It's just,.... the children."

"Ah,... I'd forgotten the children. But surely children grow up and leave us one day. We need something else in our lives Tom, and you'll have nothing but them if you stay."

"I was thinking I'd have you. It seems a pity to leave when I've only just met you."

"You shouldn't worry about that. We'll be fine. We'll still see each other,... I mean whatever happens,... won't we?"

I might have been comforted by those words. Whatever happened, we would see each other,... Tom and Rachel, twenty five years on,... perhaps I should have found that tree and carved our names after all! But there was something in her tone that came like a warning shot, a red hot shell screaming across my bows.

I looked up at her, tried to engage her eyes but she lowered them, out of reach. News to break. Not good. "Has something happened?"

"I wanted this job so much," she said. "I was too blind to stop and think why Jefferson was offering it to me."

"And?"

"You were right. They're transferring production to Korea. This place is shutting down."

"No!"

"Jefferson must have known the only thing left for me to do here was make everyone redundant. That's why I'm still hanging around, just waiting for a fax from him to confirm the details. My job is to tell everyone,... tell them in the morning, hand out their redundancy notices." She gazed out of the window into the darkness. "They're planning to set up an office in Seoul and wanted to know if I'd be interested in running it. I told them yes, but I haven't made up my mind for sure."

"Sounds like a brilliant opportunity," I said, while thinking at the same time it sounded more like the end of everything: me in France,

her in Korea. It was not a disaster for her, as it was for me. For Rachel, it was an opportunity, a road opening, one she was bound to take.

"I don't know," she replied. "All I'm saying is that I could be going away."

Of course, I had found it easy to think of altering the direction of my life in order to be with her because in my mind, she was someone I had known all my life. I remembered what Eleanor had said and realised she was right. To Rachel, I was just some bloke she'd recently met, someone she was fond of, but who was not yet important enough to feature in her plans. That sort of mutual gravity took time, or astonishing chemistry, but our time was up and as for chemistry? I saw our footprints in the sand, saw them running parallel for a while, and now in imagination, I watched them part. There was no catalyst, no frothing of emotion, nothing that would feed on itself.

Perhaps sensing my melancholy, she leaned over and embraced me. I felt the cloth of her suit. It was smooth and soft. I caught her scent and felt the lovely firm feel of her. "We'll be okay, " she said.

"I imagined being with you more," I murmured, my mouth pressed up against her shoulder.

"I know, but nothing's for certain. I might not go. I'm only saying, it could happen. But just imagine: we'll never tire of one another. There'll always be excitement and anticipation."

"That's true." I tried to sound convincing but it didn't work and she began to cast about for a change of subject, for a distraction. She'd pulled the rug from beneath my feet, but didn't want it to spoil the evening.

She decided on a guided tour of the machine shop but seemed stiff and anxious at first, pointing out this machine and that machine, uncertain of something, of herself perhaps, of how much she might be willing to share her self,... her life.

We walked slowly, side by side, our footsteps ringing hollow below the tin roof, and all the while I could feel a dull ache in my gut, a sense of incompleteness. We were together, we were lovers,... but still she did not know me. Still, in my heart I was trying to turn her head, still shouting like a child: look at me, look at me! I was still longing to hear her say those words: I want to be with you.

The machines were quiet, their hard, mechanical outlines softened by the paraphernalia of their minders: potted plants,

cardigans draped over chair backs, a plethora of calendars celebrating busty, cheeky girls all pouting improbably. It was an ugly, oily place and shared the same acrid scent of machine shops the world over, but during the day there would be laughter and the good-natured banter of people coming together for a common purpose - a purpose now rendered redundant by the blind god of global economics.

"It's all about people." She sighed. "That's what they say, isn't it? Only somehow it doesn't feel like that right now."

"It's never been about people Rachel. Just hands,... and money."

"You sound bitter. I can understand that."

"No, not bitter. Pragmatic. We're through making things. Our hands are too expensive. We've got to face it; I've got to face it. I've got to move on."

"You're more than a pair of hands, Tom. You're looking at it all wrong. Okay, the factories are closing. The world's changing and maybe we can't make things here any more, but there'll always be a place for those who are prepared to accept we've got to move around. Your place is in France, at least for the time being. Tell them tomorrow, like you said. Promise?"

Go to France, I thought. Leave everything behind that meant anything to me. Then, sure as anything, in a couple of years, bottle production would switch from Korea to some other place, and Derby's would move out of Paris to Milan or Madrid or wherever the suits decided, or more likely were compelled by forces beyond their control. So there seemed little sense in settling my life around a job - better to settle where I liked and take whatever work was going.

There was nothing wrong with Middleton, or Skelmersdale, or Parbold. As places went, they were much the same as you were likely to find anywhere in the world - some bits pleasant, some ugly - a house in which to lay one's head, a corner store, a supermarket on the edge of town, places further out for the weekend,.... an hour to the airport for an exotic change once in a while. Sure, Middleton was as good a place as any to call home.

"Will they be shipping these machines over to Korea, then?"

"I doubt it. Most of this lot came off the Ark. Look, I used to work on that one down in Norwich, years ago. It spends more time being repaired these days than making bottles."

I pictured her standing there in an overall, pressing the buttons,

ejecting the tools, the little bottles piling up, the rhythm of the machine filling her daily life for decades. But she had done well for herself, better than I considering the fact we had set out from more or less the same place. She had progressed from an overall to a suit and now the suit was opening doors on the other side of the world. But I did not envy her, for somehow in the process she seemed to have lost the need for attachment, for belonging. She was driftwood, content to go with the tide.

The fax was waiting when we returned, an inconspicuous pile of cheap and curly paper but it spelled the end for Bexley's. Rachel slipped on a pair of spectacles and scanned through the sheets, one by one.

"Okay," she said. "That's it. Give me ten minutes. Then I need you take my mind off things." She looked at me from over the tops of her spectacles, the corners of her eyes creasing a little, conveying a warm intensity. "Did you bring a bag?"

"I did, yes."

But I was distracted, thinking of her having to face the owners of those potted plants and cardigans in the morning. Some might understand, might take it well, but there would also be tears and anger and even though the sensible ones would say it wasn't her fault, her face, the face that had haunted me my whole life, would be the one they'd always remember.

"Telling these people," I said. "It's probably the hardest thing you'll ever have to do."

"I won't enjoy it, that's for sure. But believe me, Tom, it won't be the hardest thing I've ever had to do."

We left at seven, placing Rachel's BMW in the care of Bexley's night watchman. Then we strolled across the car park to the Midget. I thought it looked rather sad and neglected, just an old car showing its age rather than a restoration project, full of optimistic promise. But when she saw it, her eyes opened wide.

"I love it," she said.

"You're joking."

"No, really! My husband had one, when I first met him. It was a red one, brand new. His father bought it when he turned seventeen. Imagine! He was driving down Langholm Avenue, where I lived. I saw the car first,... then I saw him, and that was it. Silly, isn't it, the things that'll impress a young girl?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing and perhaps it was

perverse of me but I simply could not resist the irony. "Fancy a trip down Langholm Avenue then? Old time's sake and all that?"

"Oh, but it's miles out of our way."

"Not that far. Come on,... a bit of nostalgia never hurt anyone."

"Okay, why not? You know Langholm Avenue?"

"Yes, I know it."

It didn't hurt so much the fact that his car had been brand new, while mine had been old and knackered. It was more the realisation that perhaps things had not been so hopeless as I had supposed back then. She had not been seeing him while we were at school, only later, after he had driven his car down her street, driven it down on the day I hadn't, and turned her head in the way I'd intended but eventually given up on as an impossible dream.

I saw the sunshine, the top down, the shiny red paint. It might have been me! And it might have been me a thousand times over, if only I'd spoken to her just once in all those miserable school years. I cursed myself. Why hadn't I? What had I to lose beyond the shattering of the fantasy that she loved me? But of course, the fantasy had been everything, a bitter sweet delusion to be preserved at all costs.

As we drove, I was overwhelmed by her scent and her closeness. I don't know why I'd suggested it. No logical reason,... just fantasy again,... me and her together in this car twenty five years ago, driving down Langholm Avenue. I'd pull up outside her house as John had perhaps done. She'd lean over and kiss me - the taste of her, the freshness of our youth,.. "Thanks," she'd say. "Can I see you again?"

"Of course,... how about tomorrow?"

"That would be great!"

"I'll pick you up. Same time."

And then she'd look at me, her eyes becoming very still. "I want to be with you," she'd say.

I was still clinging to it, still not facing up to the truth about Rachel and me,... even though it was by now as plain as day. But all that was changing, changing by the minute as we drove.

The curtains of Langholm Avenue were drawn against the chill November darkness when we arrived. "Here," she said. "That was our house. You know, I've not been back in twenty years?"

"Your mum and dad don't live there now?"

"No. they went to Knutsford after I married. That's where I'm

from originally. Dad came to work at the Motors, but when that closed down there was nothing to keep them here."

She gazed up at one of the windows, her former bedroom perhaps. "My marriage was a disaster," she went on. "Oh, it was wonderful at first, but it turned into a nightmare. And afterwards, I was afraid to risk it again for a long time."

Then, she came out with it, a confession that cost her the first tears I'd seen her shed. They welled up slowly, silently, painting silver lines down her cheeks. "I abandoned him."

"Your husband?"

"Yes,... not a nice thing to do is it?"

"I'm sure there's more to it than you're telling me."

"He had an accident. His brain was damaged. It changed him. He became another person to the one I'd married. When I met him he was so gentle and reserved. But afterwards, he became aggressive,... unpredictable."

"He used to hit you?"

"Sometimes."

"Then I'm sorry, but you were right to leave him! You did what you had to do."

"You don't understand. It wasn't his fault. It was like a part of him was still there, but trapped inside a stranger's skin and the only way he could communicate was through that terrible rage. I couldn't deal with it. I was weak. I took comfort in other men for a while, but the first chance I got, I came up here out of the way."

"I don't blame you. You did the right thing."

"But if I'd loved him, I should have stuck with him, shouldn't I?"

Her face was lit only dimly by the street lamp we had parked beneath. I could see her cheek creased with the bitterness of the memory. She had always seemed so strong, so sure, I'd thought her wounds had healed by now, but of course some wounds lie so deep they become a part of who we are.

"I'm sorry," I said. "We shouldn't have come." I hugged her, offered her my handkerchief.

"It's all right," she said, dabbing at the tears. "Silly really. I haven't thought of him in ages."

I didn't believe her. John Ogilvy was for her as she was to me, a ghost waiting to haunt any quiet moments we might have. Our trip down Langholm Avenue had proved to be unexpectedly evocative. It had allowed me a glimpse at the depth of feeling buttoned down

inside of her, and of her love for John. I understood now it was her loss of that man, or rather the man he had once been, that was the defining factor in all that had followed.

She was still unhappy, for anyone who could consider giving up the gem of a house she owned, swap it for a company flat in a foreign city, could not be happy. She was still running away from Marsh Farm, from all that had happened. The pattern of her life was set. She would be for ever moving away, without a hope of ever moving on.

I caught her hand. "Stay with me, Rachel."

Startled, she turned and smiled. "Of course,.. we'll have some fun."

"No, I meant,..."

"We should go," she broke in and then, as I drove away she asked me: "How do you know Langholm Avenue?"

"I know every street in Middleton."

"Is that all there is to it? "

"No, you're right. There is more to it than that. I've always known it was where you lived. I used to come around after school on my bike, hoping I might see you. And later, when I'd left school and was tearing about all over the place on my motorbike, I'd still swing by, or later, I'd drive by,... just on the off chance I might see you, even though by then I'd guessed you probably didn't live there any more. And every time my heart would ache, just thinking about you and those days, so far away now.

"Don't get me wrong - I haven't done it for years,... twenty years, maybe more, but just recently, when I split up with Annie, I was drawn back - for old times sake you might say - and I was amazed how keen the emotion was, the sense of something lost,.. I mean after everything that's happened to me since we were at school,... girlfriends, marriage, children. And then I met you."

She was quiet, somehow lost in the darkness, so I felt alone even though our shoulders were touching.

"You were in love," she said eventually, as if she had finally convinced herself it was true. "Tom, that's so sweet,... you're such a,.... such a,..."

"Nice bloke?" I offered.

"Such a nice bloke. Yes."

She slid her hand across and let it settle in my lap. There was no comfort in it though, for she had obviously left out the word

"but",.... left it hanging between us, the sound of it ringing in my ears while the Midget whined its weary way back to Highmoor.

There was a cold wind shrieking up from the plain when we arrived, its sharp, sudden gusts rocking the little car as we travelled the last half mile to her gate. After drawing up outside her house, she didn't move for a long time, but remained in thought, her gaze fixed, her eyes unseeing on the road ahead.

"But," she said at last.

"Ah,... but."

"Is it me he really loves?" She did not address me directly, but asked the question more of herself. "Or," she went on. "is it the girl I was before I grew up? Worse than that, is it the girl he thought I was?"

"I know you're not the same," I told her. "I know you may not even be the girl I thought you were. So much of it was fantasy. I was afraid our time in Majorca would shatter those dreams and make you real,.... make you real the moment we made love."

"And did I become real?"

"Of course, yes."

"And do you love me now, Tom? Not the idea of me, not the person you think I am, but me. Do you love me?"

"Yes, I do."

It was true. I would always love her, for we do not love at the surface of our being. It's a more fundamental coupling than we know. People change. They grow older, their lives change them, sometimes in dramatic ways, transforming the ugly ducklings into swans, or the beautiful and the articulate into repulsive monsters, but love binds us through the changes. Even if we cannot live with the person we love, it does not stop us still from loving them.

I knew this because, across the gulf of twenty five years, Rachel was in love with John Ogilvy. She loved him as she had always done, as I had always loved her, even though neither person in fact existed as we recalled them any more. But he remained the key to understanding her life, just as she was the key to understanding mine.

She had never loved me, never secretly yearned for me and I had always known it. But I also knew she did not love me now, nor would she ever, no matter how fondly she had come to regard me. I knew it when she leaned over and kissed me, plucking my lip with the sensual sharpness of her teeth. I knew it when she pressed my

hand upon the cool stockinged luxury of her thigh. And later, upon her bed where I sank myself inside her deliciousness, I knew one day she would leave me. But the realisation was less painful than it might have been, if only because I had already spent the best part of my life getting over it.

CHAPTER 35

I rose early and dressed while Rachel lay sleeping. The darkness of her room had been rendered softly transparent by the faint glow of a distant street lamp and she appeared resplendent in her nakedness, sprawled face down upon the bed in unashamed luxury. I stroked her, unable to resist the texture and the heat of her skin. With my fingertips I traced her contours down into the deep hollow of her back, then over the cool curve of her derrière. She wriggled and smiled in unconscious pleasure at my touch, but did not wake. I was afraid we would never make love again, so I sat a while absorbing the impression of her loveliness and the pleasure I felt was tinged with sadness that the beauty of the moment was heightened only by the sense of its impermanence.

Eventually, I covered her and crept downstairs in search of coffee. It was not yet dawn and on my way to the kitchen I was lured into the conservatory by the view of the illuminated plain far below. It was a part of the world I knew well and yet it seemed foreign that morning. Those roads, so familiar in daylight were transformed by darkness into mysterious traces, like strings of phosphorescent pearls, leading to places I could not imagine.

I thought of Eleanor, thought of her sleeping down there somewhere in that seething mass of luminous coral, curled up and alone. I thought of myself six months from now sleeping in some Paris suburb with the hum of the city going on all around, and I thought of Rachel in the heat of Korea, her dark eyes watching while rows of white-gloved hands pressed the buttons of roaring machinery.

There seemed little doubt this was the way it was going to be, for the dawn was breaking now, the roads revealing themselves from the gloom of night, leading each of us on to the next stage of our entirely separate journeys. Sure, there seemed no doubt, but that did not mean I felt any of it was right.

Rachel appeared some time later, loosely draped in a satin gown. She greeted me with a smile but seemed otherwise reserved, hesitating to touch, and embrace, her face in deep shadow, the unpleasantness of the day ahead beginning to eat into her. We shared breakfast in the conservatory while maintaining a companionable silence, and from there we watched the day break

over plain,... blue-grey clouds revealing themselves spread low in the western sky and slowly tearing into strips of vermilion.

"Shepherd's warning," she said, quietly.

"Hmn?"

"Storm coming."

I followed her gaze. The sky seemed too slow and sleepy for a storm, but I sensed a change. We drove to Skelmersdale in a dull grey light, the roads were sluggish with traffic, the trees at the wayside stark and black, the overgrown hedgerows still weeping with the weight of overnight rain.

"You're a good lover, Tom."

"You're very kind,... but it takes two."

"We could go on, couldn't we,... being lovers?"

"I hope we shall."

"You've no regrets then?"

"Only that I never asked you,... I mean back then. I wish I'd known you all this time, been married to you all this time."

"You haven't missed much."

"I think I have. I think I've missed something remarkable."

"We should be with those who love us Tom, don't you think?"

"Of course."

"And set aside those who don't, no matter what we feel for them."

Bexley's car park was already half full when we arrived and people were striding purposefully to take up their places,... in their offices and by their machinery. We watched them go, knowing their fate and for a long time, Rachel seemed reluctant to move.

"Good luck, then," I said.

My voice seemed to snap her out of a dream. "I don't know how long this will take. I'll probably have to go to Norwich tonight. There are meetings all weekend."

"Don't worry. There are some things I need to sort out as well."

"I'm sorry if I've hurt you, Tom."

"You haven't hurt me."

She smiled and shook her head. "I think I have."

She pressed my hand, then left the car, left me only with the space she had occupied and suddenly the air felt cold. I watched her walk away towards the open door, watched it swing, then close itself upon her and something turned inside of me,... we should be with the ones who love us, and set aside those who don't,... I

thought she'd meant she should be with me, because she knew I loved her, but watching her go, I realised she was saying it was me who should set her aside, that I should be with someone who loved me. And then I realised that without even knowing it, we had already said our last goodbye.

I was an hour late for work but somehow that sort of thing didn't matter any more. Stavros caught my eye but said nothing and I offered him no explanation, settling down instead beneath a smoke screen of spurious activity in order to while away the hours until finishing time.

I tried not to think of Rachel because I felt quite calm and was afraid the emotion inside of me was of the delayed variety, that if I tempted it out I might suddenly be overwhelmed and Stavros would find me blubbing in the toilets. But come she did, a sudden flashback,... a day in June, 1977, the sun slanting hot through the windows of the classroom where I was completing an examination paper. Mathematics; my last examination; my last day,... indeed my last few minutes at County High.

I'd actually finished the paper ages ago and was stringing out the time, pretending to check answers I was already certain of. She was in the building somewhere, another examination, another room. I was keenly aware of her presence, and felt that to have walked out, to have gone home would have been to finally close the door on the dream. It would have been to say goodbye.

The moment had come of course when I could delay no longer and I'd gone, but slowly, sauntering along empty corridors, a circuitous trek to where I'd left my bicycle. And all the while I'd hoped any minute to hear the doors crash open behind me, to hear her hurried footsteps, to hear her crying out as if in some highly charged finale, that she loved me,... that she wanted to be with me.

My heart ached that day as it so often aches when I think of her. She changed my life, but did not love me. She changed my life but did not even know I was there. Something broke inside of me then and I knew it was over. I also knew I would never again measure love by what I had once felt,... for her.

In the course of that brief winter's day, the sun rose and set behind the dilapidated shed of Derby's former glory and slowly then, as the Smiths clock swept up the final minutes, my thoughts turned at last to Eleanor. We had agreed to talk that evening, to sit down face to face and to discuss our lives. The neon lights burned

feebly as darkness painted out the windows, and the more I thought about things, the more straight forward they now seemed to become. She had to stay in the house and I had to go to France. I had to somehow reinvent myself, take the language and the culture to my heart, find myself a nice French lady - keep in touch with Eleanor, write her long letters, perhaps see her now and then.

Monday.

I would tell Stavros on Monday.

At last, I snatched up my jacket like a man on a mission,... but Stavros appeared at my elbow, exasperating to the last! He'd had all day to speak to me, but chose this moment, when I was on my out.

"Have you decided then, Tom?"

I felt panicky, looking around for some means of escape, some means of putting him off. "Eh? About what?"

"France, you dickhead! The deadline's on Monday. I thought I'd better remind you. You've not been yourself lately."

"I know. Sorry. Yes. I'll let you know,.... on Monday."

"Make sure you do. How are things going anyway? Fancy a drink?.... I'm just on my way out. If you hang on a sec. I'll get my jacket."

"Sorry Stav. I've got to rush. Got to be at the dentists in five minutes."

Lies! Evasions! I broke out into a sweat, confused by my feelings. If I was so certain about France, why I could not simply have told him? It was puzzling, maddening,... but by the time I'd reached the car and settled into its damp interior, I knew, for all the apparent inevitability of it,.... I would not go.

I drove to the nearest off-license and chose a couple of bottles of Chianti for my evening with Eleanor. I remembered its potency and intended getting us both quite drunk. There had to be some plain and speaking, without barriers, without defences and I hoped the wine would serve us well, but when I reached my father's house, I found it empty and I knew Eleanor had gone. There was a premonition of it in the sound of my key in the lock, and when I entered it was in the dead silence of the place, as if without her it could not live. I called her name, called it with a passion, but the walls rang hollow with the emptiness.

I burst into her room ready to recoil in case she lay upon the bed, her pale body carelessly draped,... dark stains on the bedclothes at her wrists. She was not there, but the air carried with

it the ghost of her scent and her stillness. The drawers slid open, light to my touch. They were empty, as was her wardrobe, and the sight of their bareness stung - not simply because she had gone, but because I knew I had failed her.

I found a note on the kitchen table. It was written in beautiful script - Eleanor's best and most calmly considered hand, a thing at odds with the turbulence underlying her life:

The only way for us to move on.

Love Eleanor

The only way to move on? To go? To run? Then the timer on the oven began to chime; so many contradictions! She had gone for ever it seemed, but had thought to leave a stew cooking for my tea!

I telephoned Phil to ask if he knew where she was. He told me I hadn't to worry, that he'd come round yesterday with his van and loaded all of her things, but wouldn't go so far as to tell me where she'd actually gone.

"How will she manage, Phil? She needs a place. She needs money."

"She'll be fine," he assured me.

"Is she with you?"

"Don't ask, me Tom. But trust me: she's okay."

"Did she say anything about why she went?"

"Not much. I know you've been a good friend to her and I'm grateful, but you mustn't worry; you've done all you can for her. It's up to her now."

His words shamed me because I'd done nothing. It was Eleanor who had helped me sort through the derailed mess of my own life while I'd mostly stood dazed and helpless.

"Tell her I'm sorry she felt she had to go. Tell her if there's anything I can do, she knows where I am."

"Sure," he replied. "I'll tell her."

But when I put the phone down, I had the feeling I would not hear from him, the feeling of a door closing and the cracks filling up all around, so that if I once took my eyes away from it, even for a second, I would never find the opening again. Whatever had happened to us, whether we had lived together or apart, I had always imagined being in touch with Eleanor - talking to her or writing to her from wherever I ended up in the world. But now, being so suddenly without her, and worse, so inexplicably rejected, I felt more alone than I had imagined it was possible to feel.

I found myself wandering about the house searching for something of hers, something personal she might have left behind. This was not like the times I had been rejected by a lover and had wanted to purge them from my system by disposing of every memento. With Eleanor, I felt a need for something I could hold in my hands, and in holding try to understand what had happened. But there was nothing. It was as if she had never been.

I remember later watching the coals and listening to the familiar sounds of the house, the little creaks and cracks of the place cooling down for the night. I should have felt comforted there, but instead its familiarity mocked me, and gradually I was overwhelmed by the notion that all the years I'd spent away from that place had been horribly wasted. I had lived and worked for a quarter of a century to build a life away from Arkwright Street, and now it seemed the ultimate humiliation to find myself washed back upon its shore with nothing, and with those I loved either dead, or gone, or slowly drifting away.

CHAPTER 36

In the morning I drove uninvited to Phil's house. It was perhaps not the most sensible thing to do but his was the only place I could think she might have gone at such short notice. The moors appeared cold and bleak surrounding the little farm in its field of mud and I thought to myself as I approached that she would go mad in a place like this, so lonely,... and overhung by such an uninviting waste of land.

It was dawn, a pale yellow light slicing over khaki hills, a fine drizzly shower driven on a bitter, peat scented wind. Phil came to the door in his dressing gown, hairy legs stark white beneath its hem, a dishevelled bear, hardly able to keep his eyes open.

"Tom!"

"Is she here, Phil?"

He looked at me, his heavy lids peeling slowly open a little wider. I smelled beer and read a hangover in his lined face, in his shaggy hair. "I told you, it wasn't your fault. You did your best."

"I don't know if I did."

"Listen, mate. You've got your own life. She's not your problem." Then a half smile escaped him and he gave me a sympathetic shrug. "Women eh? Look, she was here but she took off in my van last night and hasn't come back yet." He extended his arm, inviting me inside. "Let's have a brew, it's bloody freezing out here. She'll be home when she's ready."

We drank tea in the kitchen. The place smelled of boiled cabbage and cow manure even though the farm had probably seen neither in years. There was dirty washing piled up on the counters, clean pots mixed with soiled ones, the sink stacked high with pans and the remains of several crushed and glittering six-packs scattered across the flag-stone floors.

"Had a few lads round last night," he explained. "That's why she took off I suppose - likes it quiet does our Ellie. I'd forgotten that. Not a good start. So anyway, what happened? Did you have a row? Only she didn't say. I can understand it if you did. She can be difficult, closing herself off, not letting anyone near, then snapping at you just for trying."

"It wasn't a row exactly, but something's been brewing since my dad died. I wanted her to come away to France with me, I thought

we could both make fresh starts."

"And she wouldn't budge? Well, it doesn't sound like our Ellie's sort of thing - France, I mean. She rarely goes out of Middleton. Even this place is like a foreign country to her. It's a pity, she wouldn't go. It would have done her good."

"Well, I thought the least I could do now is make sure she's okay for money. She needs something at the back of her. There's my dad's house,... it's hers by right. We just need to sit down and sort everything out properly."

"I wouldn't worry about the house, Tom. You need a place yourself right now. Ellie knows that and besides, she has a bit of money of her own."

"She'll need more than a bit."

There was a pause, while he stared down at his feet and considered something. "You don't know about the money then?"

"The money?"

"It seems like things are coming to a bit of a head. Look, you've got to promise not to let on to her that you know. And if she ever tells you herself, you've got to act surprised, okay?"

He went on to explain how he'd once run into a spot of bother with the Inland Revenue. Hawksworth had represented him and during their meetings Phil had also happened to mentioned the misfortunes of his sister.

"Hawksworth reckoned he could help Eleanor win some compensation,... It was a private clinic where they butchered her, right? Well, Hawksworth brought a case against them for negligence. A couple of weeks before it went to court, they settled it quietly, just like he said. He would have taken the government on too for locking her up in the first place - I mean, the police and the legals who sent her down should have been strung up. There was never any evidence against her, no history of violence. Just her confession."

"She confessed?"

"Said she smothered the little mite with a blanket. But she was just a kid herself, Tom,... twelve hours they bullied her - no lawyer, no parents, no friends, no sleep. Sure, just sign this love, and we'll let you go. I'd probably have signed it myself. Then the trap doors opened and she fell into her worst nightmare."

It seemed that every time I heard a piece of Eleanor's story, it just kept getting worse. I groaned. "Bloody hell, Phil,..."

"Hawksworth said she had a good chance of proving it had been an unsafe conviction, but that it would most likely have had to drag on for years and Ellie, well you can't imagine what she was like before you knew her. She wasn't up to it. She knew that and she just wanted to forget the whole thing. She still got three hundred and fifty thousand from the clinic. Who knows what she's worth now. I don't think she's touched any of the capital,... It's all properly invested and managed. Hawksworth set it up. She just draws a bit of income from it and she doesn't exactly have an extravagant lifestyle. So you see, money's never been a problem for our Ellie."

"I'd no idea."

"It's not something she talks about much. She even told me once she'd rather never have had it because it was a reminder, tying her to a point in her life she'd sooner have forgotten,... like the money was poisoned and living off it was bad for her. There was also the stigma of course,... what people would think, if they knew,... better just to forget it,... if you can ever forget a thing like that."

So, the house didn't matter, nor my father's relatively meagre bank account,... and if she needed a place to live, she could just go out and buy one. I couldn't help myself: I laughed.

"All those years. Phil! My miserable family - Eric and Agnes and the rest of them thinking she was sponging off my dad, when all along she was worth ten times as much! If they'd known, they would have been inviting her round to tea!"

"Exactly. And that was another reason she used to keep quiet, because people see you differently, when they think you're loaded, don't they. They see the money,... they don't see you."

I waited for an hour but she did not come. We talked about cars and motorcycles and bygone days,... of turret lathes and shaping machines and the thunder of hot metal as it was quenched in oil. But in the end, I became nervous.

"Maybe I'd better go, Phil."

"I'll tell her you called then."

"Perhaps you shouldn't. I don't want to upset her. I don't want her thinking I'm pestering her or anything."

"It's up to you. But why should the money change anything?"

"The money doesn't change anything."

He gave me a sneer and a sideways look, his mood disintegrating, his hangover settling in. "Of course it does. I should never have told you."

"I'm happy about the money."

"So how come one minute you're banging the door down wanting to see her about something so urgent it can't even wait until after breakfast and the next you're sneaking away not wanting her know you've been?"

"All right, maybe I came here thinking there was something I could do for her, but from what you've said she doesn't need anything. I'd better just leave her to it,... it's obviously what she wants."

"Bollocks," he said. "Have you never thought maybe what she wants from you, she knows she can never have?"

"And what's that supposed to mean? I'd do anything. She just won't let me. She won't let me anywhere near."

He folded his arms and looked away, closing himself off. "I'm not saying any more. I'm in enough trouble as it is, if she ever finds out. But you do need to talk to her, and if she was here right now, believe me, I'd bang both your fucking heads together."

CHAPTER 37

Phil was right; it was the money. It made me think she was not quite the person I had imagined her to be. It took a while to calm down, to remember of course she was the same. The money had simply given her some protection, some independence from the world, and from me. I wanted her to be safe, but only if her life was bound up with mine. I did not want her to be able to manage alone.

On the subject of Eleanor, it seemed the world was divided into two camps,... one inhabited by those who used her weakness as an excuse for doing her harm,... the other by those who saw it as a means of controlling her. And I was as bad as the rest, controlling her,... badgering her into this plan or that plan, when all she wanted was to be left alone, to make her own quiet way; to simply be.

I drove back to Arkwright street under something of a cloud, then walked into the house and closed the door, leaning on it heavily, slamming it shut, slamming out the demons. For months I had been sending out tiny ripples into an uncharted ocean, questions,... unfathomable signatures of every question I had ever asked. And now, quite suddenly everything had been turned around, reflected back from a deeper part of me, gathering force and towering like a tidal wave to come crashing through,... and in its wake there lay the answer, high and dry and unambiguous,... the knowledge that in leaving this place, I would be preserving only the bits of me I valued least, while abandoning everything I held most dear.

I could not reinvent myself somewhere else, any more than I could do it here. It did not matter that my life had brought me full circle. It would not have mattered if I had spent my entire life living in Arkwright Street, rising each morning of my forty-two years from that same little room, or if by some quirk of fate I had ended up as the Prime Minister. I was not what I had done, or where I had been: I was who I was,.... and I was who I had loved.

Slowly, I became aware of a presence in the house and I looked up with a start to find Eleanor studying me through the kitchen door.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

I wasn't sure. Seeing her like that had come as a shock - her long

figure framed in the doorway, a pale, Pre-Raphaelite portrait, very still, yet as always somehow portentous. "I thought you'd gone."

"I just came to get some stuff,... and to give you your key."

I'd searched the house last night for something to hang onto, a forgotten earring, a handkerchief,... anything, but she'd swept away all trace of herself, scrubbed herself from the walls. And as for the key, she could have pushed it through the letter box. She was lying. There was no stuff left.

I said: "I thought we'd agreed to talk."

She gave me a warning look. "Don't start on that again. I was afraid if I didn't cut and run you'd win me round somehow."

If only I could have been so persuasive, I thought. "I hope we can stay in touch, that's all,... this seems so final, but I think I understand. You need space,... you need room to be who you are, without some idiot crowding you."

"What? What's that supposed to mean? Have you taken to reading trite self-help books, or something? And since when have you ever understood anything?"

Sarcasm, I thought,... not Eleanor's style. I didn't want her to walk out, so I found myself tiptoeing around her, speaking softly, as if she were a timid cat. "Your note. 'The only way to move on.' That's what you said. And it's okay, but please, just stay in touch."

She looked down at her clasped hands, and opened them slowly to reveal the screwed up remains of the note. "You read it, then?"

"Of course I read it." I was puzzled and my tiptoeing came to an abrupt end. "This isn't about the key, is it? Or your stuff. You just came back for the note."

She bit her lip and flushed red.

"I don't get it, Eleanor."

She turned away and folded her arms over her stomach, her body bent slightly as if in pain, then she gave me a look,... incredulous, bewildered. "You read it, and you still don't get it?"

"Is this about the other night?"

"What?"

"You know what I mean,... in the bathroom. Can't we just forget it? It's not important,..."

She shook her head, exasperated now. "It's got nothing to do with that."

"But what else is there?"

She parted her lips to speak, then changed her mind and instead

she balled the note up and threw it at me. "Is it really so unlikely to you that you can't see it?... even when it's spelled out?"

She made to leave. I caught the note as she passed, caught her scent and the soft whip of her hair on my face. I reached out to take her gently by the elbow, but at the slightest touch she spun round violently so that we faced each other. She was wild eyed, her nose flared with anger.

"Eleanor what is it?"

"Just let it drop. Let me go." She sounded brisk, dismissive,...

"Can it really be as bad as all that?"

"Just stop it!"

"What?"

"You're doing it again,... being nice,... and reasonable,... and calm. And, it won't work."

"I want to help. You've done so much for me. Now it's my turn."

"It's beyond helping. There's nothing you can do."

A thought struck me and I turned cold, my body gripped by a sudden spasm of terror. "You're not,... ill are you? Eleanor, please! Don't shut me out, I want to know."

Finally then she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, smiling to herself. "No," she said. "Not ill." Then she looked at me, a hint of tenderness dulling the fire. "I'm in love with you, that's all."

It hit me square between the eyes and I lowered myself to the table unsteadily, my hands not feeling the wood even though they were pressed flat against it. Then I found myself unscrewing the note, smoothing it flat.

"The only way for us to move on. Love Eleanor." No comma between the word love and the word Eleanor! It was such a little thing, yet it changed the meaning entirely. The only way for us to move on was not for her to go, but for me to love her. But I didn't, and knowing that, defeated by the hopelessness of it, as I had been with Rachel so long ago,... she'd gone.

It was true. She was in love with me. It was the reason we could not go on being together as friends, for how could she have sunk herself into my careless proximity feeling the way she did, while I pursued dreams of love elsewhere. I understood it all perfectly.

I felt sick to the stomach of my stupidity. All that time! All the morbid emotion of my youth! I'd showered her in it, drenched her in it, but worse was the thought that I'd dragged her the length of the country in search of an unrequited love for someone else, when

all along everything I had ever felt, she felt for me.

While I was sitting there, absorbing this, Eleanor took off her coat and began making a pot of tea, her emotion hidden in the familiar ritual. It was out now, the whole of it filling the air between us, a tangled and unwieldy mess. But it was something,... I emerged from my daze, to see her pouring water into the pot.

"How long?" I asked.

She set the kettle down gently, without a sound. "Always," she said. "Isn't that the way with these things,... all or nothing and both amounting to pretty much the same in the end?"

"You could have said something."

"How could I? No. I would never have said anything,.. not while you were with Annie, and not while Jack was alive,... Never. Ever."

"Okay, I believe that. But afterwards,..."

She leaned heavily against the counter and shook out her hair so that it fell about her waist. It had lost its shine, its fluid energy, its flatness mirroring the sadness in her eyes. "Tell me when it would have been right." she said. "How many days after we'd buried your father would it have been right? A week? A month? A year? Tell me when anything I might have said to you would not have sounded indecent. That's why I came back for the note. At first I thought I should tell you, in the same way you felt you should tell Rachel,... but then, last night I got to thinking it couldn't do either of us any good, that it was unfair of me because it was too late anyway."

"Too late?"

"Of course it's too late. You have Rachel now. Your dream has come true. I didn't mean for any of this to come out. Knowing I how I feel could only make you feel bad. Well,... doesn't it? You don't exactly look as if it makes you feel great."

I was numb, not entirely in control of my words. "Rachel and me,.... that was bound to pass,..."

"What? You're saying it's over already?"

"I don't know,... I feel it won't last,... can't last. Rachel's life is her job. It's been that way since Norwich. I'm never going to fit into all that."

"It wasn't bound to pass at all - she couldn't get enough of you. You're letting her go! How can you? She's something you've dreamed of your whole life!"

"And like you said, I'm some bloke she's just met. Maybe in time, she could love me, but we'll never have that time. She's already

talking about taking up a job in Korea."

"Then go with her. You'll find a way if it's what you truly want!"

"But is it? I've thought about it and the way I see it, after all this time, the best we can hope to be is lovers off and on, and that's only half a relationship isn't it? And if all I'd wanted was a lover, I could have stuck with Carol. It's not enough, Eleanor. She's never going to want to simply be with me, is she?"

"Then let her go." She gave a sigh,... impatient, confused.

All I could do was gaze at her, amazed and feeling absurdly warm inside. I was forty-two years old and this was the first time a woman had ever told me that she loved me, that she was profoundly, deeply, in love with me.

"Eleanor,... Eleanor,..."

"Don't, Tom. Don't look at me like that. We're neither of us teenagers. We both know there can be no happy ending here."

"Why not? Eleanor, stay on with me for a bit. Surely you don't mean to live with Phil. That place of his will drive you crazy!"

She, brought the cups to the table and sat down. "You're forgetting. I'm already crazy,... and you still don't know what you're asking, Tom."

"Just for a little while."

"Not even for a minute. It's killing me to be near you. You of all people should know how it feels."

"But,... it needn't be like that. Things can be,... different between us."

"Tom, I'm sorry it hasn't worked out with Rachel, but really it makes no difference. We're the same you and I - both of us in love for such a long time. And if Rachel can't be with you even knowing how much you love her, how am I supposed to believe you can ever want to be with me? It's the same thing and there's no future in either."

"It's not the same at all. I've known you for years."

"Not as a lover."

"Better than that. I've been closer to you than with any woman."

"I know. And that just makes it worse. I know you love me very much, and I shall always treasure that. But Tom, you are not *in* love with me."

She clasped her arms against her body and rose, avoiding my gaze, shaking her head, refusing, denying, shutting me out. Then she gathered up her coat, and made to leave.

"Please don't go. Give me time,... give me a chance,... a chance to love you. We can move on from this, I know we can."

She leaned over and kissed the top of my head, as she might have kissed a child in parting. "Goodbye Tom," she said, and then she walked out.

"It can't end like this," I called after her. "And you can't want it to either,.... or you wouldn't have written that note."

But she'd gone, and there came only the sound of door clicking shut, so cool, so controlled, and there came a sense once more of the emptiness of the house.

I remembered a girl breaking up with me once. She was small and pretty, with long auburn hair and a soft round body. I'd wanted sex and companionship, with an end game of marriage and children. She'd wanted sex and fun,... sex and fun. Incompatible differences,... a break-up inevitable. I'd come home, fresh from her parting words, her tears still wet upon my collar, and I'd set about disposing of the usual reminders; the old birthday cards, the sweater, the photographs, then gone to bed in the middle of the day and tried to sleep away the heartache as if it were no more than a hangover.

I remember the melancholy settling over me, as it settled over me now. There was comfort in it,... nature's anaesthetic for a heart suddenly torn open. From the beginning I had been seeking the resolution of things beyond my control, and rather than solve anything I seemed only to have witnessed the disintegration of everything I had built, down to the very foundations of my life. And now there came the additional sting, the knowledge I had also trailed misery through the life of someone whose quiet presence I had always held in the very highest regard.

I put Joni Mitchell on the player and listened for a while, then went up to my room, drew the curtains and slid beneath the covers fully clothed. I listened to the final plaintive tracks coming from downstairs, before drifting gradually into sleep. And as I drifted, I dreamed a presence. A warm body curled against my back,... the stillness of it, the caress of hair against my neck,... and I dared not move for fear of hastening its departure.

I should have telephoned Rachel by now, I thought, asked how things had gone, asked where she was and when I might expect to see her again. I might have added that I loved her,... that I would always love her, but the telephone lay in my jacket pocket,

switched off, its battery fading. It was better to let it go. I imagined lithe arms around my waist, now,.. soft hands crossing upon my chest, taking me and pulling me gently away. I felt hot breath curling around my neck, and then a voice came out of the darkness. "Love me," it said. "Love Eleanor."

CHAPTER 38

It was a Friday evening towards the end of the old year when I drove out of Derby's gates for the last time. And as I made my way down Bridgeman street, the bulky silhouette of the factory seemed to melt into the darkness, making it possible to imagine the bulldozers had already swept it away.

The thought did not trouble me as much as I had once believed it might, and I could more easily accept that the Derby's I carried in my head, like my marriage, had ceased to exist a long time ago. It's just that there's something in me that always makes me want to hang on, something that makes me want to believe things will come good in the end. I was wrong. Only in our heads do things remain the same. All things must change. We move on. We survive.

I did not go directly home but found myself taking a detour by Langholm Avenue, the Midget delivering me once more to the house where Rachel has lived in memory all my life. That evening, the curtains were parted, the lights were on, and inside I saw a middle aged chap, holding a baby. He was bobbing it gently up and down and the child was drifting off to sleep. They seemed alien, encapsulated by the light and intruding so rudely in my past like that, but of course a generation had come and gone since I'd first passed that way, and it was me who had no business there any more.

All my life, there has been no other place like Langholm Avenue, but that evening I saw it for what it was: just another street in a provincial town, going to seed; scarred pavements and old houses shouting out the idiosyncratic improvements of the last quarter of a century: plastic windows, satellite dishes, block paved drives and bulging conservatories. I did not stop but cruised by slowly, absorbing this mysterious transformation, a final dissolving of all my dreams into reality.

I paused at the junction to let the traffic clear, and while I waited I gave the dials a tap. They were old dials, silver on black-crackle, telling me an antiquated tale of volts and oil pressure. It had been a long road, the road from Langholm avenue, but after it all I discovered the pressure, the pulse of my life, was stronger than when my journey had begun.

I glanced back in the mirror at the lights of Langholm Avenue.

They were quivering with vibration, the whole scene appearing to blur out of existence as I played upon the throttle. There were no regrets, no sense of time having been wasted wallowing in the uselessness of nostalgia. On the contrary, sometimes, it is important for us to look back, to pause a while and truly focus on our past, for it's only then we see our lives in some sort of context,... only then we can discern the emotional landscape that has shaped us.

And we are shaped by those we love, though quite helpless in our choices,.... helpless also if those we love choose not to love us in return. I've known the power of such a love, stood paralysed while it swept away all reason, and I've experienced its echoes fresh from a time when all else has been forgotten. I was shaped by it once, but shaped anew in learning to finally to let it go.

Slowly, I made the turn, heading up through town in the direction of Arkwright Street, and home. I felt okay, strangely comforted by the melancholic grumble of the engine. Or was it hope? Rachel was gone, I knew that, but Eleanor had yet to return my key, and one of these nights, she would be waiting. You might say I was wrong to hope, but sometimes in life and in love, the most we have to go on,...

..... is a feeling.